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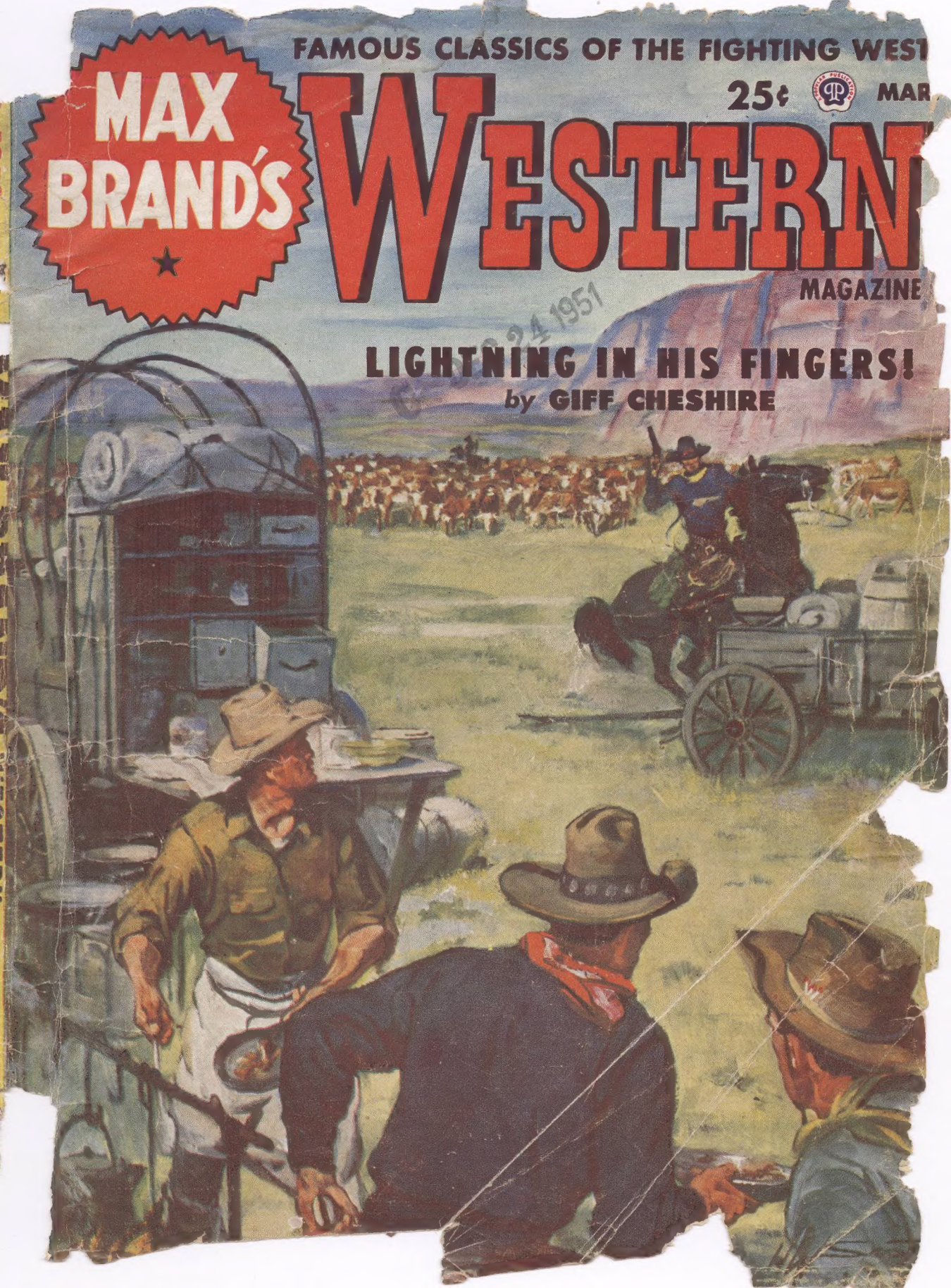
MAX BRAND'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

MAR 24 1951

LIGHTNING IN HIS FINGERS!

by GIFF CHESHIRE



FAMOUS CLASSICS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

25¢ MAR

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MAGAZINE

LIGHTNING IN HIS FINGERS!

by GIFF CHESHIRE

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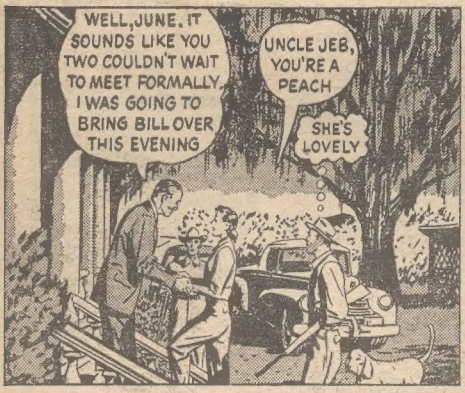
WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
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Combined with ALL STORY WESTERN

VOL. 5 MARCH, 1952 NO. 3

DRAMATIC FEATURE STORY

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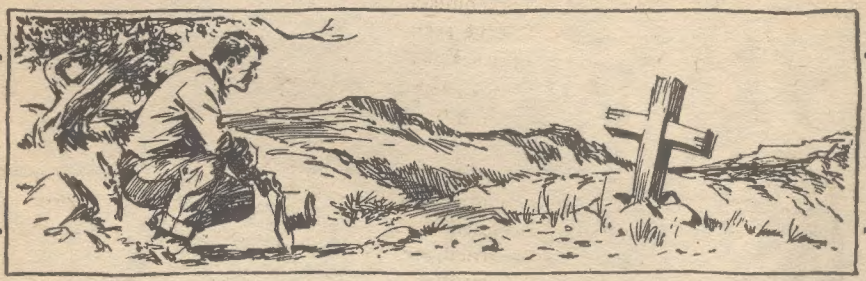
Gil Hudson, frontier editor, needed more than guts alone when he faced his brother's killers.



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• WEEP • NO MORE

When even the judge cried. . . .

By Bart Cassidy

THE Crying Kid wept his way out of trouble time after time. It was at his trial for his first offense as a petty thief, in Amarillo, that he accidentally learned of his talent for being able to concoct a convincing and heart-rending tale of woe, backed up by copious tears, which would move a hardboiled frontier judge and jury to release him.

His artistic ability to act out the part of a young, innocent youth, caught in a net of circumstances through no fault of his own, kept him free of jail terms of any kind for three years. His successes in wailing his way into the sympathies of otherwise practical courts merely served to make him bolder in his unlawful pursuits. From petty theft he worked his way up to small-time cattle rustling and horse stealing. By the time he had worked his way up to Colorado Territory, in 1862, he felt talented enough to rob a Denver Bank. If the worst came to the worst, he knew he could sway any court into believing that such an innocent appearing and well meaning young man would never be involved in such a thing.

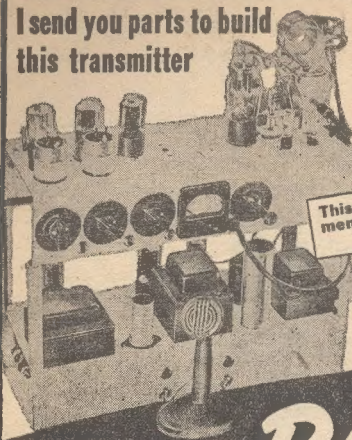
As he was known only to other criminals as "The Crying Kid," and had no jail record behind him, much as he deserved many, he was booked simply as an unknown young fellow, an itinerant, when he was apprehended in the act of holding a partially-hidden gun on a bank teller in the Denver Miners Bank.

The Crying Kid was slightly worried as his trial started. As the testimony of the teller, the police and the witnesses piled up

(Please continue on page 8)

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I send you parts to build this transmitter

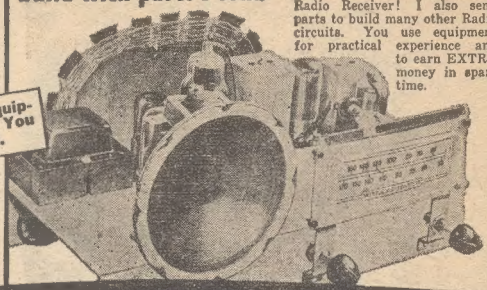


As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

You Practice Radio SERVICING

on this modern radio you build with parts I send



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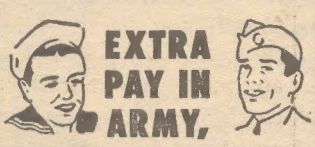
"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse NRI."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.



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(Continued from page 6)

against him he began to make up his sad story. As he mulled it over, he was of the opinion that it was the best one he'd ever thought of. When he took the stand he would say, while crying piteously at the right spots in the tale, that he was just a youth from Kansas City who had heard his poor old mother was dying. Sick and broke, himself, he was trying to get merely enough money to pay his fare back home, where he could be a comfort and a help to his dying mother and dear old dad.

While previous testimony was being given, the presiding judge had not uttered over ten words, and the Crying Kid had not bothered to look at him closely. It was not until the Kid took the stand in his own defense that he noticed that Judge Allen A. Bradford was already weeping.

The judge, probably already emotionally affected by the sight of this fine young fellow being in such a mess, sobbed on a high and hesitant voice, "Tell us your side of the matter, young man."

The Crying Kid glanced at Judge Bradford. He could hardly believe his eyes. With great pleasure he noted that tears were streaming down the judge's cheeks. All this effect, and The Kid had not yet opened his lying mouth.

The Crying Kid hardly bothered to turn on his own tears. His tale was simple, but quite sad. However, it was far from being up to The Kid's best. Even so, as he talked the judge cried more than ever. His handkerchief was brought up to wipe away the tears time after time. His voice, when he spoke, throbbed and choked with emotion.

Feeling that his blameless and open-faced boyish manner and looks had won him his freedom, the Crying Kid had not the slightest doubt that he would be freed immediately.

With a hidden smile on his lips, The Kid sat quietly to hear the judge instruct the jury, as to the verdict.

In his weeping manner, Judge Bradford sobbed, "You have heard this man's story, and the evidence. It is a clear-cut case. This young man is—is—" Here the judge's voice broke completely for a moment. With an effort he regained his speech. "This young man is—is—a lying, thieving, hardened criminal. He is a no good bu—bu—bum. He was caught—*sob*—trying to rob a bank. See to it that you—*sob*—bring in a verdict of guilty!"

The jury did as it was instructed to do. In turn, Judge Bradford, weeping loudly, sentenced the Crying Kid to a long stretch in the territorial prison at hard labor.

Nobody was surprised at the verdict but the Crying Kid, himself.

Later that evening, when the jailer brought him his supper, The Kid felt he had to find out what had happened. Not that he could do anything about it, but, in spite of his fear of the prison, and his bitter disappointment at the verdict, his curiosity was aroused.

"I thought sure that judge was going to let me go free," he told the jailer.

"Not Judge Bradford," said the jailer. "He is the toughest judge in the West. But he is always fair and just."

The Kid scornfully said, "He ain't tough at all. He cried all during my trial. Is that tough? That's why I figured I'd go free. He cried an' cried, so I thought—"

"You thought wrong," said the jailer. "You see, Judge Bradford has a couple of strange ailments that make him seem to weep all the time. First, he was born with faulty tear ducts. They don't close up. So tears usually are running out of them. Second, he has a kind of part-paralysis of his vocal chords. This gives him that sobbing way of talking. Together, his ailments make him seem to be crying all the time."

"I never heard of a Weeping Judge," said The Crying Kid.

"Well, you have now," said the jailer. "To the tune of ten years at hard labor."

For the first time in his life the Crying Kid really cried. ★ ★ ★

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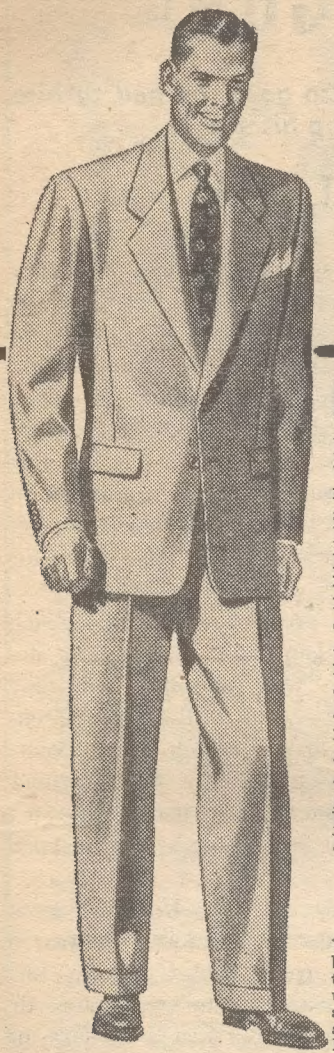

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THE DEVIL RIDES SHOTGUN!

Gun guard Calister was so good, he had to hire men to hold up his stage!

By John T. Lynch

WEBB CALISTER, riding as shotgun guard for the Salt Lake Stage Line, in the early '70s, was so good at his chosen profession that local surviving road agents wisely refrained from tangling with him. The many ex-bandits, now in boothill because of Webb's downright resentment at being disturbed on his runs, served to discourage attempts to acquire treasure boxes for which Webb Calister was responsible. Things got so quiet on Webb's trips beside the driver up on the box that Webb had to hire town barflies to pretend to be road agents. There was never any trouble or bloodshed in the fake holdups, but the gunguard had to show something on his reports or the company might think he was no longer necessary on the payroll.

Calister's runs became so uneventful that he took to riding in comfort, inside the stage, when there were no passengers. When there would be but one passenger, Webb usually could talk him into riding up on the box with the driver. "You won't miss the fine scenery that way."

With the aid of a quart of cheap whiskey to stimulate what small amount of nerve and ambition they had, a bleary eyed pair of Webb's barfly "actors" decided it would be an easy matter to actually hold up that night's incoming stage, on which Webb would be riding shotgun.

The alcoholic duo of bums hazily reasoned that if anything went wrong they could merely tell Webb that they had made a mistake in when he had told them to stage the next spurious stickup. Also, they told each other, hopefully, by the time Webb awakened to the fact that they were in earnest, they would have the drop on him.

It was on one of those pleasant evenings when Webb Calister was able to convince a paying passenger, the only one on this trip, that it would be great to ride out in the open, up on the box. As usual, this left the upholstered interior an ideal place for Webb's slumber in absolute privacy.

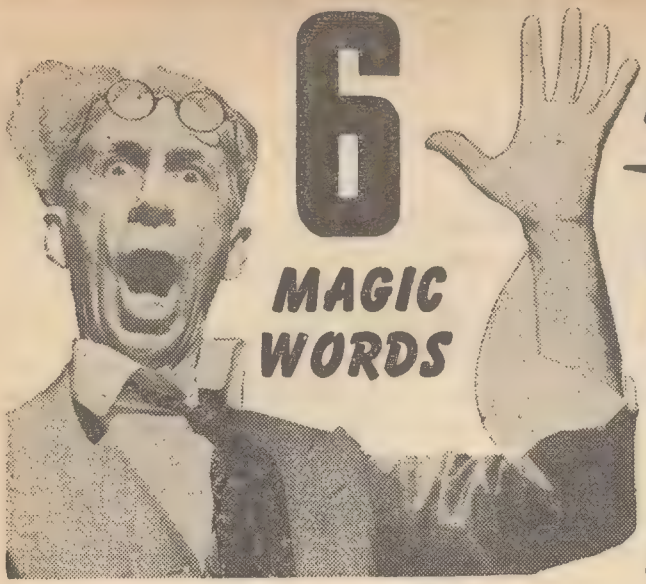
His shotgun propped within easy reach —more out of long habit than present necessity—Webb was sleeping snoringly when the passenger, up on the box, suddenly prodded the driver, Scotch Terry. Pointing up the road alarmingly, the passenger said, "Look up there. Two shapes just came out in the road. Maybe they're road agents!"

Scotch Terry laughed. No road agent would bother a stage containing the feared presence of the great Webb Calister. "Just a couple of jackasses wandered out in th' road," said Terry. But just to be sure, he squinted his sharp eyes and peered through the early dusk.

"If them's jackasses," muttered the passenger, "they is th' first ones I ever saw that could stand on their hind hoofs and level guns at men."

"Yep," Terry chuckled. "I was wrong. They are road agents." He grinned. Two more of ol' Webb's pretend-badmen. "Just don't you say or do anythin'," said Terry. "They don't mean no harm."

(Please continue on page 12)



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(Continued from page 10)

Terry laughed uproariously as he halted the horses and the two road agents aimed guns up at him. "Hey," he said. "I mistook you two for a pair of jackasses when you came out in th' road. Ain't that a hawk-eyed whizzer?"

"Shut up an' throw down th' box!" ordered one of the would-be bandits. "This time it ain't just a fake!"

The other stumblebum stood as steadily as he could, leveling his shotgun at the curtained door of the stage. He well knew that Webb Calister was sleeping therein—he could hear him snoring.

Scotch Terry called down from his perch, "You two must be crazy—"

"Throw down th' box! I ain't goin' to tell you again!"

In all the annals of the West, here was the most stupid and foolish stage holdup ever attempted. Scotch Terry, himself far from an amateur when it came to dealing with real road agents, plus the presence of one of the greatest shotgun guards of all time, totaled up to the only possible result. . . .

BOTH "bandits" stood on the same side of the coach. Webb Calister, suddenly awakening, listened to the voices outside for a few seconds. He knew exactly what was going on. Quietly grabbing up his gun, he got out of the stage on the opposite side, unseen. Making his way around the back of the stage, he made a silent dash to the far side of the road. From his position he easily covered both ambitious barflies.

"Drop 'em!" he said, simply but definitely.

The two bottle tramps lost no time in obeying the order. Their attempt at stage robbing was a complete and dismal failure. Disarmed, cringing and whining, the pair waited while Webb and Scotch Terry talked the matter over. The lone passenger, unimpressed by the proceedings, chose to keep his seat, and ignore the whole affair.

"I thought they was a couple of jackasses when I first saw 'em," said Terry.

"You were right," said Webb. "They sure are jackasses. But they are another kind of animal, too."

"What kind?"

"White elephants."

"What do you mean, white elephants?"

"They staged enough fake holdups for me," Webb said. "If I take 'em in an' get 'em arrested, they'll tell all they know. How I hired 'em to hold us up—so I could show action on my runs. On th' other hand, if I turn 'em loose—they'll talk anyhow. So—what can I do with 'em?"

Scotch Terry shrugged. Making sure that he talked loud enough for the passenger to hear him he said, "Well, th' least you can do is make 'em hike to town. It's about ten miles from here. They don't deserve to ride."

Webb grinned. "Good idea. I need some exercise, anyhow. You go ahead. I'll mosey along with these two on foot."

Four hours later, almost the entire population of Salt Lake was at the edge of town to see Webb Calister march in with his prisoners. The passenger and Scotch Terry had spread the story of the attempted holdup without delay.

There were murmurs and whispers from the waiting crowd when Webb walked in to town. He was alone.

The sheriff stepped forward. "Where's them prisoners, Webb? I been waitin' to lock 'em up."

"Danged me if they didn't both start to run away from me," Webb answered. "One of 'em snatched my gun, and they both ran. They kept shootin' at me, but I caught up to 'em. We had a terrific fight. I got my gun back. They kept at me—an' I had to kill 'em both in self-defense."

It was a logical explanation. Everybody accepted it. All but one man. Scotch Terry just grinned. "A couple of jackasses, then white elephants, and now—dead ducks."

He chuckled to himself. ★ ★ ★

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The villagers had heard of San Cobar. The old legends said that it was a place of great wealth. But it lay beyond the mountains from which no man had returned alive. True, El Borracho, the drunken trader, had returned from his mysterious wanderings with rich ornaments, but he was now far gone in drink.

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Stirring Town-Tamer Novelette

By Giff Cheshire

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Brother

HE HAD been awake since midnight, twisting and turning in the hot bed, unable to sleep, waiting for Andy to come in. So he heard the first pebble that someone tossed against the upper half of his opened window. Gil climbed from bed, a sense of uneasiness shooting through him. He thrust head and shoulders through the raised lower window, catching the sweet, heady scent of the blooming locusts in the Hudson's yard.

He called down softly, "Who is it?"

"That you, Gil?" a lowered voice replied from below. "It's Frank Villard. You'd better come down. It's about Andy."

Gil stopped his next impulsive question before it was uttered. He understood then why uneasiness had haunted him all through the night. Something was wrong, and it had to do with Andy. Frank Villard

Gil Hudson, frontier editor, never did lack guts, so he never hesitated to face his brother's killers. What he needed, however, even more than courage, was—

LIGHTNING IN HIS FINGERS!

Gil saw Ralph Tundra, who rode ahead, spill from his saddle. . . .

was the night marshal of Twin Plains. Everyone in town knew of the necessity for creating no undue noise or disturbance near the Hudson house.

Sam Hudson had been a popular man, and everyone knew about his dangerously weak heart that had kept him confined to bed for the past several months. Gil dressed hastily, leaving off his boots until he had descended the stairs and crossed the front porch to the yard.

Frank Villard's dark form loomed out of

the bushes and he came forward. Gil spoke in a whisper. "What is it, Frank?"

"Your brother Andy," Villard said. "He's dead."

For a moment the warm night seemed to swirl around Gil Hudson. He had always half expected his wild young brother to get into trouble someday, but nothing like this. He sucked in a long breath, then, in a voice that was very quiet, said, "What happened?"

Frank Villard was not a popular man in town, being, it was supposed, one of Pete Braxton's men, yet even he seemed to have some idea of the sensibilities of the occasion. "Well, Gil, he tried to stick up the game in the Golden Bucket Hotel. I just come from there. There was just too many men handy with their irons around. Henny Gilstrap drilled him."

The words were like bullets driving into Gil Hudson and made as little sense. "But why?" he gasped. Even in the darkness he could see the night marshal shrug.

"I wouldn't know that," said Villard. "He's over at the hotel."

Gil collected himself enough to say, "Well, thanks for coming over quietly," and watched the figure of Villard evaporate into the night. Gil moved dazedly down the street, two blocks over and turning left on Main. The big poker game that ran in the elaborately finished attic room on the third floor of the hotel was an object of wide interest and curiosity. Gil Hudson had never played there, for the clientele was small and select, the general public being kept to the big main barroom on the main floor. Yet he understood that nightly big money crossed the table.

If his kid brother Andy had ever been playing there, Gil didn't know where he had got the money. He had seen Andy early in the evening, too drunk for Gil to let him come to the house, yet Andy had promised to come to the home to sleep and to see his father before riding back out to Hay Hook. Andy was three years younger than Gil's twenty-six, and had ridden for the big spread out on Oglalla Creek since Sam Hudson had sold the Circle H and moved to town. Gil could concede that the boy was a little wild, but evenso he could ascribe no motive to Andy's reported attempt to hold up the town's big game.

A block down Main, Gil Hudson turned up the broad steps of the hotel. At this hour the lobby was deserted except for the room clerk who dozed at his desk and who came awake as Gil passed through, casting him a guarded glance. Gil went on up the stairs, passing the second floor and turning on to the third. Whatever guests had been disturbed by the shooting, they seemed to have retired to their own rooms now.

As he mounted the second flight of stairs, the low drone of earnest talk came to Gil's ears. As he appeared on the landing, this hushed. There was a double door opening from the landing, both halves wide open now. In the waxy yellow lamp light of the room, ribboned with smoke, he saw half a dozen men.

HE CAME into the room, feeling its sudden hush, a tightness gripping his chest. Old Doctor Lornet was there, and beyond the doctor, stretched on the floor, was the figure of a man with a bloody handkerchief still knotted about his neck. It would be Andy, and the impact of the sight was a staggering thing.

Gil paused inside the door, searching the faces that watched him closely. He liked none of these men with the exception of Doc. Frank Villard had returned here and stood now by the window, with his thumbs hooked into his belt, quiet and coldly official. During the night hours, when the evil in Twin Plains was most active, Villard was the law. He felt this importance, yet, at the same time, it was common knowledge that he was the willing tool of Pete Braxton.

By the door stood Sid Farley, gambler

and lieutenant of Braxton. Tall and emaciated and dressed in a carefully brushed suit of black, he regarded Gil Hudson with the amused speculation that so often was in his recessed eyes. Two others, Taney and Snell, were riders off the range, sometimes suspected of carrying out one of Braxton's dirty chores.

Still seated at the card table was Pete Braxton, and Gil regarded him with cold intensity. In the last three years Braxton had built up an invidious political machine that controlled not only Twin Plains but the entire county and its officers. He headquartered in this little town, which was not the county seat, to dissociate himself as much as possible with those officials. He ran the graft and vice in all the towns throughout the county, assisted by men as capable as himself. He was a fleshy man, taller than the average, yet Gil knew it was all solid meat.

There was something in Braxton's steel-gray eyes now that sent a cold feeling rippling up Gil's spine. These men, not counting the doctor, were all his. Where was their sucker or suckers for the night? The entire group, again excepting the doctor, gave him the impression of being a rehearsed cast, waiting for the cue to deliver their lines.

Gil moved no closer to Andy's body. His glance touched Doc Lornet's, then, and he saw the only trace of sympathy in this room in the old medico's eyes. Doc nodded, which answered Gil's silent question and meant that Andy was really dead.

Though Pete Braxton waited for Gil to break the silence, Gil did not, and finally Braxton said, "Well, Gil, naturally you're wondering what happened. It's too bad. We all hate it, but we had to do it. We didn't even know who it was until we had dropped him and taken the handkerchief from his face. It happened a half hour ago. There was a lot of money on the table. Suddenly the door opened and Andy came in, masked and with an iron in his hand. He tried to disguise his voice, but there were so many of us in here he couldn't keep us all covered. That's how Henny managed to pick up his iron and get off a shot. It was as good as Henny usually makes 'em. It dropped Andy."

Gil had noted that Henny Gilstrap, who was Braxton's slickest gunman, was not present now. "But why would he do it? He made tophand wages. They'd give him all the fun he wanted."

Braxton shrugged. "He didn't say why, Gil. And all we know is that he did and got shot. Too bad for your sake, and your dad's, but that's how it is."

Gil turned to the doctor. "I suppose that sample of the law over there will hold his body. There doesn't seem to be any more you can do for the boy. Could I talk to you?"

He had their story, did not believe it, and wanted to hear no more of it.

The doctor nodded, and nobody objected when they left. They moved on down the street to the office of the *Twin Plains Weekly News.* Inside, Doctor Lornet looked at Gil.

"Gil, I know damned well you didn't believe what they told you up there. No more than I did. I don't know how or why, but I've got the feeling it was rigged. I have a hunch Andy was in that game. He's been playing up there lately. I knew it, though I don't expect you did. He had a handkerchief over his face, all right, when I got there and it was bloody from the hole in his forehead, but they could have fixed that, afterward. It was Henny Gilstrap's slick gun that did it, all right, but not under the circumstances they claim." The old medico shrugged wearily. In his years in the cow country he had had much to do with violent death, and he had no taste for it.

Now he brought his intelligent old eyes to Gil's and continued, "Son, it looks like your editorial campaign is paying off in the way I feared."

GIL HUDSON looked around the small office of the weekly paper of which he was editor and publisher.

"But why Andy? Why did they kill him? Why, they haven't even warned me to lay off! You'd think they'd try a threat before resorting to anything as risky as murder."

Doc Lornet hoisted his gaunt frame onto a stool and slumped there tiredly. "Since he supposes himself to be a god, Pete Braxton must keep his workings mysterious. We're only guessing, Gil, however sure we feel. From the time you started your paper a year ago and took up the cudgel against him, I knew something like this was coming. And our problem right now is, what are we going to tell Sam?"

That was a worry Gil had not yet reached. "You're right. What will we tell him? It would kill him, sure. And there'll be no keeping it away from him. Doc, you're the only man in the world Sam will take orders from. Why can't you tell him that he can have no visitors, whatsoever. Then I could tell him Andy is away, somewhere. If Sam's got to die, I want him to die happy, and now I—I hope he does before he finds out."

The doctor studied it and nodded. "It might be a good idea, Gil. He'd cuss me out, but he'd mind me. I'll do that. We won't let anybody see him at all except you and, of course, Martha. Think you can rely on her?"

Gil nodded. "Yes, she'll be willing to do what's best for Sam. We've got to keep it away from him, Doc. Sam wouldn't believe that Andy tried to stick up that game any more than you and I do. But the shock of it—the worry—would kill him. Sam would get out of bed then and there and go gunning. We've got to keep it from him till Sam is either dead or I can clear Andy's name."

Doctor Lornet nodded, his lean cheeks gray with fatigue. "Think you *can* clear Andy's name, Gil? There were five men there who will testify as to what they claim happened. And even I would have to give objective facts that would look bad for Andy, even if they did contrive them themselves. What I think is only my own opinion. It wouldn't hold up in court."

"I'll clear his name!" Gil said harshly.

The doctor left, then, all the weight of his years showing in his weary movement. Gil waited in the newspaper office until daylight began to lift the shadows off the town. He was a large man, bigger than Andy had been, with black, crisp hair above a solid, grave face.

Like Andy, he had grown up on Sam Hudson's Circle H spread, in the Illilu country. Sam had not run true to longhorn cowman form when Gil had shown a preference for another way of life than the cattle industry. He had sent Gil to school, and when Gil had returned had financed him in a paper over in Gila Bend. Then, a year ago, had come the chance to buy the *Twin Plains Weekly News*, closer to home.

When Sam's advancing age had brought physical infirmities, the spread had been sold because Andy Hudson could not be relied upon to manage it properly, and Gil did not want Sam to have the worry of trying to supervise the boy. It had made Andy resentful, and was perhaps somewhat responsible for his wildness, yet even he acknowledged in rare moments of candor that it was for the best.

Sam had moved in to town to live with Gil, with old Martha Quillin serving as housekeeper and caring for Sam after he became bedfast. As soon as she was up, Gil meant to see her and explain what had happened and the plot he had cooked up with Doc Lornet for keeping it away from Sam. He knew that she would go along with it and could be trusted to see that nobody violated the doctor's restrictions, though she would be bound to hear the gossip in the town. Even clearing Andy's

name would not take the shock of his death from Sam. It had to be kept from him somehow for the few months that Doc said were all that remained for Sam.

With this course decided upon, Gil turned his mind to the other problem. When he had come to this town, a year ago, he had seen the little four sheet country paper as more than an instrument for disseminating news. Pete Braxton had built his corrupt political machine during the years of Gil's absence, but Gil had meant to challenge it.

Gil smiled in bitterness, remembering it. The lightning he had believed to be in his fingers had given off scarcely a spark. He had written eloquent, raging editorials. They hadn't so much as roused Pete Braxton, their target. Then, six months ago, when a county election had returned the whole crooked bunch to office, he realized he had had little if any effect upon the electorate.

He knew that essentially he was a reserved man, lacking much of the fire that was in old Sam and had been in Andy. After the disillusioning election, he had decided that his newspaper was no sharp instrument of reform. He went back to scattering the news and local advertising.

An anger that he knew was unreasoning was rising in Gil now, as he waited out the last small hours of the night. It had not been his own decision to again take the cudgel against the Braxton gang. It had come from a girl—in countless little indirections, yet aimed squarely at him and at crowding him into becoming a crusading editor again.

He had nothing but love in his heart for Hanna Fosdick, yet the bitter thought crossed his mind that she, as much as himself or Andy, was responsible for this. Hanna had always been an implacable and outspoken foe of the color the politics in the county had taken. She was alone in the world, operating the seamstress shop over on Main, and this self-reliance had developed an uncommon courage in the girl. Gil saw now that she had been leading up to it for a long while when, that night, several months before, she had come out with it bluntly.

"Gil, you're the one man in the county who still might do something about things. The country knows its law is crooked but it does nothing about it because there is no single and organizing force to keep up an eternal pressure and crystalize opinion that might be turned into action against the Braxton machine."

Gil recalled now that he had laughed at her. "My dear, I tried it once before election. And they voted the Braxton bunch back in. All I accomplished was to run the risk of getting the *News* put out of business, but even Pete Braxton refused to take me seriously. I'm neither a gunman nor a pugilist, and that's what it seems it would take to beat Braxton or to scare him."

Hanna Fosdick had drawn her slim, shapely body erect, tilted back her neat, poised head and looked at him gravely. "So you've really lost your faith in the power of the press. You weren't here very long beforehand, Gil. And don't you realize that election was probably rigged?"

Again Gil had laughed. "To be powerful, the press has to have power behind it, Hanna. Strong political support. Money. Something. The *News* is just a dinky little country paper."

She had pressed against him urgently then. "Don't lose your faith, Gil! Give yourself time! There'll be another election and another. Someday you'll win. It would attract attention outside the county. It might even bring an investigation by the state legislature."

So Gil Hudson had started his campaign again, hacking away at corruption and graft, telling the truth. He had resumed his thundering, wrathful editorials. Yet tonight had brought the first sign he had had that he was having any effect on the

Braxton machine, let alone the voters. He was totally mystified as to why they had attacked him through Andy. Why hadn't they tried to threaten harm first?

There had been much dirty work from the Braxton bunch that the controlled law enforcement officers had glossed over. Gil admitted that it was not out of character for Braxton and his henchmen to act so viciously and with total surprise. Yet he could see it only as a step to further operations, and from the effect the *News* seemed to be having upon the countryside he could not see why so coldly calculated a campaign should be launched against it. He no longer had the illusion that his paper was that important or influential.

CHAPTER TWO

Braxton's Threat

AT SIX O'CLOCK Gil went home, knowing that Martha would be up. He told her what had happened, and the horrified old woman readily agreed to the plan.

"But that boy never done it, Gil!" she said fiercely. "They're lying! It's more of Pete Braxton's work, I'm telling you!"

Gil shaved and cleaned up, and had his breakfast in Sam's bedroom with the sick old man. It constricted his heart to see the cheerful morning freshness in Sam. Sam knew he was going to die, though he never referred to it, and he seemed to accept the fact cheerfully. He had had a long and useful and full life.

They talked idly about the paper, about the weather, and then Sam asked, "Time Andy was coming in. Seen him lately?"

It took all his will-power for Gil to control his expression. Yet he kept a lightness in his voice. "I was just going to tell you, Dad, that he was in last night after you were asleep. He didn't want to wake you. But he's going up into the White Chip country with a bunch after some wild horses. Maybe they'll be gone several months. He said to tell you so long and he was sorry he didn't get to see you. But he wasn't going to risk waking you up, knowing how cross you are when that happens."

Sam chuckled, and Gil knew that he had put it across, and he knew that he wasn't going to let anything happen to make Sam think any different than he did right now.

Gil went back to his office. At nine o'clock the county coroner came from Crow Junction, which was the seat. Gil remained away from the inquest, not wanting to hear their lies again, unable to trust himself through its course. When the proceedings were finished and Andy's body was turned over to the undertaker Gil tried to lose himself in work, hoping to regain his perspective a little.

It was no use. His grief was crystalizing now into impelling hatred, yet bafflement lay over it all. What could he do about it? How could he prove that they were lying? Thousands in the county might believe him but how could he make a crooked law admit that murder, cold and deliberate, had taken place there in the gambling room in the Golden Bucket Hotel attic?

A shadow moved past his window, bringing Gil out of deep thought. The door opened and Hanna Fosdick stepped into the office. Gil climbed to his feet, and she came to him at once.

"Gil, it's terrible! What are you going to do?"

He kept himself calm by reflecting that it was like her to think first of the action to be taken. That was Hanna Fosdick's way. Something happened, and you acted. He had long known that she thought him too much the man of quiet reflection and too little the doer.

"What is there to do?" he asked, in a low voice.

Hanna's eyes studied his face. "Gil, I heard the talk. Outwardly they're accepting the story Braxton told. But probably

they're thinking something else. I know it. Gil, I know you're thinking that you tried to fight for the townsfolk and it cost you this, while they're still unconcerned. You mustn't! You can't lose your faith in humanity if you're going to run a good newspaper!" Her concern moved him. "You'll have to print the story. Don't print what they said at the inquest. Tell the truth!"

"What did they say at the inquest?" Gil asked.

"Weren't you there?" There was surprise in her eyes. "I would have come over sooner except I thought you'd be over there."

Gil shook his head. "But what did they say?"

"I wasn't there, either," said Hanna, "though I heard some things. I'll let you find out from someone else, Gil." There was fierceness in her voice, then it ran out of her and she turned to him, clutching the front of his shirt with tense hands. "Oh, Gil, don't let them put it over on you!" She kissed him, turned and fled to the door.

She was barely gone when someone's boots fell heavily on the sidewalk, and a corpulent figure passed the window. Gil's eyes narrowed when he saw it was Pete Braxton, and he was standing erect and dangerous-eyed when the politician stepped into the office.

Braxton's gaze flicked Gil with what amounted to indifference. He was smoking a cigar, and he removed it, dusted off the end absently, then his eyes bored into Gil's. "Hudson, I thought you'd be at the inquest."

"I heard your lies last night!" Gil snapped.

Braxton gave what was a poor representation of surprise. "Lies?" Then he shrugged, smiling. "You're upset, Gil. But you'll be printing something in your paper about it, and I wanted to make sure you had the facts. They run back a ways. Gil, your brother Andy was into me for better than five thousand he lost at poker. I knew he wasn't good for it but your father is. I threatened to go to your father with it. Andy begged me not to. He said it wouldn't be good for old Sam. And it looks like he decided to get the means for paying off the debt at the place where he ran it up. My game. I don't give a damn what you're thinking, Gil, but it happened just like I'm telling you. And, my boy, you're going to print the whole story."

"Why should I print anything?" Gil asked.

The big, loosely-constructed man looked thoughtful and lowered himself cautiously into the roundbacked chair by Gil's desk. "Son, you've got a right smart amount of influence with this little sheet of yours. Surprising. You've been saying some damfool things about me and my associates. I haven't minded too much, figuring it was just a small squeak that I might have to grease sometime. Then I got wise that a lot of people were following what you have to say. There's been a lot of malicious talk about me, in this county. I know what they're apt to say about Andy Hudson's death. That's why his own brother is going to print all the details."

A weak feeling had hit Gil, though he did not show it. He filled and lighted his pipe to cover it and give him time to think. "That makes sense," he reflected softly. "If I print the story the way you tell it, it means I'm endorsing it. It would shut my mouth from ever saying anything further about it, wouldn't it? Well, Braxton, you can go to hell. I think I'll print the story of my brother's death the way I think it happened."

There was no concern in Braxton's face. He drew on his cigar, let smoke wisp out and curl up around his heavy florid face. "Remember how I said I threatened to collect Andy's debt? Supposing I went to Sam Hudson and told him what had happened? I've got a strong hunch you're trying to keep it from him, Gil."

There was a moment then in which the room seemed to spin for Gil. It was unbelievably callous, yet he knew that if Braxton had used that threat before he would use it again. And he would not be above carrying through the threat if it were challenged, forcing it through the tenuous guard they had tried to build around the sick man.

Pete Braxton clearly saw what was in Gil's mind. He pushed himself out of the chair with a grunt, strolled to the door and went out without a backward look. Gil Hudson knew that he was hamstrung as long as Braxton used the tack of this threat. Even while conspiring with Doc Lornet and Martha, he had realized it would require care and ingenuity to keep the news away from Sam. Gil knew that he was lost. He had to report Andy's death and the inquest findings exactly as the Braxton bunch had told it.

In spite of the night's events, the town passed through an indolent, normal day, cattlemen and nesters coming in off the hot desert toward evening for trade, for a few drinks in one of the three saloons, some of them to buck the tiger at Nick Cullen's Golden Bucket Hotel and Bar.

An arresting futile sense was in Gil Hudson. The paper was due out again in two days and normally this was a period of activity while he gathered the last local news and advertising, set his last type and made up the forms for the flatbed press. He had no clear idea of why he grasped for time, because he knew the answer could be nothing other than the one he had already found. He had to go along with Braxton. He had to help cover up what he knew had been the murder of his own brother for the sake of his father.

That evening he did not go to Hanna's place, next to her shop, as he so often did, but remained at home. He spent a little time with his father and, seeing the placid, relaxed features of the old man, he felt that at whatever cost he was going to let Sam die happy. Then, but not before then, he could take matters into his own hands. He burned for action, his hatred of Braxton and all his coterie of cold-blooded, scheming and grasping men was a compelling thing.

He saw now that until this day Gil Hudson had never been a real fighter. Yet he had become one through the very fact of now being paralyzed. But he had to wait; somewhere he had to find patience. Playing checkers with old Sam that evening, the irony of it struck Gil that he should be compelled to wait until his father had died. It was as if he hoped for that death, which he did not. He wanted Sam to live as long as he could, as happily as he could, to wind up a long, rich life in peace of mind.

So, the next morning, Gil Hudson sat down at his desk in the office of the *Twin Plains Weekly News* and wrote the news story exactly as Pete Braxton had dictated. It filled him with nausea yet it was his grim duty and he wrote without hesitation. That afternoon he went to his brother's funeral.

The little four-sheet paper had not been on the streets of Twin Plains for two hours before Gil knew that he was through in the town. He saw it in the eyes of everyone who came near him.

FINISHED with Hanna Fosdick. There was no outward evidence of it but it was there in her eyes and in the quick expressions that passed across her face. He did not tell her why he had done it so, for now it seemed to him that it would have the appearance of finding an excuse. He did not try to explain that a week from now, a month from now, or a year from now, he was going to settle accounts with Pete Braxton.

He went that evening to Hanna's place, knowing what to expect and wanting to get it over with. He said at once, "Well, I guess that does it, eh, Hanna?"

She had looked quickly away from him.

"Gil, you're upset. I don't want to quarrel with you after what has happened. I won't pretend that I approve of what you've done. I don't think you're afraid of Braxton. I think that you've lost faith in your work." She no longer looked at him in her old friendly, frank way.

Gil left shortly. There was no use telling her that all those old arguments were inconsequential, flimsy things now. More than from her talk about the power of the press, he had learned through Pete Braxton that he had probably been more influential than he had thought. He was glad that he had been. While the issue of clean or crooked government for the county still stood, it was more than that. It was a personal issue between Gil Hudson and Braxton and all of Braxton's men who had been there when Andy was shot down.

Gil knew that there was little use in trying to dig up proof of what had really happened there in the attic gambling room. As long as Braxton controlled the law, the truth would be distorted, buried and repressed until it would be of little value. This was no place for heated, eloquent editorials by a crusading editor. It was far beyond that. Here was a deadly issue between men.

It was the next morning that Pete Braxton came again to the office of the *Twin Plains Weekly News*. Once more he was blunt. "I've got a hunch you don't like the newspaper business so well anymore, Gil," he said. "I'd like to buy you out. I know a man I could get to run the paper. It might not be a bad idea for me to be molding a little opinion hereabouts, myself."

Gil shook his head. "You seem to be running one, as it is, Braxton. You had your way. Much as I use words, I can't think of a way to tell you my opinion of a man who would use a dangerously sick man as a weapon. It's only because I know you're snake-blooded enough to follow through that I let you dictate to me. But make no mistake about this. It won't be for long. And when I come at you, Braxton, it won't be through the columns of my paper. When I come I'll have a gun in my hand. And I won't come to one of your henchmen but to you."

There was a moment of freighted silence. The big politician removed the eternal cigar from his thick lips. He stared at Gil, something dangerous stirring in his eyes. "You've got more guts than I thought," he said softly. "But don't play the fool, Gil Hudson. You'd be dead a long time even before you got close to me. And even if you did reach me, I'd be willing to take my chance with you any day. Ink-slinging doesn't make a man an expert with a shooting iron."

IT WAS that evening that Rick Owen, who rode for Hay Hook, came into town with Andy's war bag. He was a short, chunky man, with red hair and a blunt jaw, and he entered the newspaper office with blazing eyes.

"What's this story you printed in your paper about your own brother?" he demanded hotly.

Gil met his eyes. He had known that Andy and Rick Owen were close friends, although Owen had not traveled with the younger Hudson in his wilder doings. Gil shrugged. "I didn't invent it, Rick. It's what they said at the coroner's inquest and I had to report it. Those apparently were the legal facts."

Owen snorted. He laid the gunnysack he had been carrying across a table of type. He made a cigarette, lost in reflection. Finally he said, "Andy was taking money out of that game, all right, Gil, but not through any stick-up. He was winning it."

Gil looked at him in surprise. "He was?"

"He sure was!" said Owen. "And that's what got him shot. Gil, he was five thousand dollars ahead the afternoon he rode into town to get into that last one. He was riding a hot streak of luck and playing it wild. He aimed to buy himself a spread, if

his luck held. But it looks like he wasn't lucky."

"You mean you think he lost it?" asked Gil.

The red-headed puncher frowned. "I mean he probably won his bets. And it was too much money for Sid Farley to lose up there. So they shot him to get it back."

The blood was coursing swiftly in Gil. It had seemed strange to him that Pete Braxton had risked so much merely to muzzle a small newspaper. This put a different look to it. If Andy had entered that last, lethal game with a five thousand dollar stake, meaning to ride it out, he might easily have been a huge amount ahead.

The Golden Bucket Hotel and Bar belonged to Nick Cullen, the semi-secret gambling room on the top floor was operated by Sid Farley, the gambler, but everyone knew that it was on Pete Braxton's money, and that the hotel in general was headquarters for Braxton, who stayed there mostly. It made sense now. He had no doubt that what Rick Owen suggested was true. It gave them plenty of motive for murder, and Braxton had used the threat against Sam merely to muzzle Gil Hudson, knowing that Gil would be roused to fury by it.

Rick Owen broke into his thoughts with bitter words. "Andy and me were friends. He aimed to stake me to an interest in the spread he was going to buy, if he was lucky. So I've got a stake in what happened. I'm squaring it with Braxton and his bunch." In the puncher's eyes there was a quiet scorn.

Anger rose in Gil. "Listen, Rick! I feel like you do. Braxton's my meat. But there's Sam. He threatened to tell Sam the story that was brought out at the coroner's inquest, unless I complied. My hands are tied for a while. When they're free, I'll see about it myself."

"But my hands ain't tied!" Owen exploded. "There's no reason why I can't tend to the big son!"

Gil shook his head. "Even if you killed Braxton—and they'd probably never let you get to him—you'd go up for murder, Rick. Frank Villard would see to that. It's a bigger job than a little gunsmoke. But I'm glad I've got a partner."

"But what are you doing about it?" Owen demanded.

"My hands are tied as long as Sam lives, Rick. He's only got one son left."

Owen looked at him closely, then walked out.

Alarm shot through Gil. It would be sheer suicide for Rick Owen to tackle that bunch alone, precipitous, reckless, powered by blind hatred. Gil Hudson knew then that the situation was out of hand. Old Sam would not want to buy a peaceful death at the cost of his son's cowardice. With regret that his careful, steel-willed plan had failed, Gil turned toward his desk.

He pulled open the top drawer and from it took a gunbelt and Colt .44. He strapped on the belt, examined the gun carefully, wholly calm now. He did not know exactly what he meant to do, but he knew that he could not let Rick Owen walk into Braxton's snake nest alone.

He stepped out to the walk, locked the street door of the newspaper plant and cast a glance in each direction along the street. Its quietness spoke out to him in mockery. He could see nothing of Owen. He paced down the walk, loose in body and completely calm in mind. Except for the desperately delicate dilemma in which he was caught, there was a certain grim satisfaction in him. It was a thing he had wanted since the second he had become aware of Andy's fate.

Heavy gunfire in the town might carry to Sam. Whether or not he would be hurt by it depended upon the outcome. If Sam Hudson lost another son, could Doc Lornet tell him that Gil also had taken to the back country in search of wild mustangs? It was this point alone that put the fear of death into Gil Hudson.

Across from the Golden Bucket Bar, Gil cut a sharp slant through the dust, stepping onto the walk and brushing through the varnished batwings that were used when the outer door was kept open.

At that early hour of afternoon the place was not busy. A couple of low limit games were in progress on this floor, participated in and watched by town loafers. There were three men at the bar, a pair of them punchers in town on business and picking up a quick one. At a space from them stood Rick Owen, with a shot glass on the mahogany before him.

Aside from the bartender, none of Pete Braxton's known henchmen was present, and relief shot through Gil. He stopped at the bar, taking place next to Rick, who glanced at him with an unfriendly question in his eyes. Then the puncher's gaze dropped to the gun at Gil's middle, and at last a pleased expression showed in the weathered face.

Gil ordered whiskey, pondered a moment, then said, "Guess there's no stopping you, Rick. But I wish you'd go about it sensibly. I'm ready to go along with you the moment the sign is right." The bartender was out of earshot, but was watching them closely. It was evident to everyone that the pair conferring out at the bar were the two men who had been closest to Andy Hudson. There was wonder now in the eyes that turned their way. Knowing this, Gil said, "Finish your drink quick, and let's go get something solid under our feet."

He saw that he had won the puncher. Owen tossed off his drink, turned and followed Gil onto the sidewalk.

CHAPTER THREE

Gil Goes Gunning

THEY moved down it and once more turned into the newspaper plant. Now there was a slightly defensive look in Owen's eyes, as though he had been caught in brashness. "I was just looking it over, Gil. When I try to turn myself into hell-on-red-wheels, I'll want some good targets there. I know the six men who were there when they dropped Andy. According to your paper, they said at the inquest that it was Henny Gilstrap who did the actual shooting. He's the one I want first. Then as many more as I can get."

Gil nodded, respecting Owen's ideas but not agreeing entirely with him. "Rick, if we kill off one of Braxton's underlings, he'll only find somebody else to take his place, and the situation will be exactly what it was before. To my mind there are three men who, if they were killed, would bring down the crooked political organization. They all hang out in this town. Those three are Braxton, Nick Cullen and Sid Farley."

Owen shrugged. "Gil, I don't have any hankering to clean up the county. With me it's personal. I want to get the man who got Andy."

"And you're ready to swap your life for his?" asked Gil.

"That's how it stacks up, Gil."

Gil nodded. He knew that there was no holding Rick Owen long, and that an elaborately planned campaign was out of the question. He said, "All right. Henny Gilstrap and Sid Farley are in that attic room every night. Ride out now and lose yourself somewhere and meet me here again tonight about eleven. Come to the back door. Then you and I will take a look over there."

There was eagerness in the mercurial puncher now. He grinned. "It's a deal, Gil. But remember, Henny Gilstrap's my meat." He turned then and left.

There was a new mood in Gil through the rest of that day. He had committed himself headlong and without a very clear idea as to what would be gained. Yet he knew that he had to do this, that Owen could not be held back long, that Gil Hudson would never be able to respect himself again if he allowed someone else to take up

alone the burden that was rightfully his.

His next press day was three days off. The thought that Hanna had planted in his mind bothered him through the rest of the afternoon. What was this power of the press that she kept insisting on? Its meaning to him was sharpened now with his awareness that he had needled Braxton more than he had believed. He saw now that his tactics had been wrong. There was no opinion to be molded in this county through thundering editorials by a crusading editor with lightning in his fingers. Opinion against the Braxton gang had long since been formed. The trouble was that it had to be kept submerged. Men were even afraid to wield the power of election openly, and the voters had permitted Braxton to control them.

Now a strange, simple and daring plan was forming in Gil's mind. It would be equally as dangerous for him as going up to the Golden Bucket. It called for no editorial eloquence but a matter of fact simplicity. After careful deliberation, Gil picked up a pencil and began to write.

It was only a little one-inch insertion for his local news column. When he had finished, he lifted his gaze to stare for a long while at the windows, slowly filling his pipe and lighting it. He picked up the sheet of copy paper and read:

> The editor of the *News* is taking depositions from anyone possessing definite knowledge of political corruption and abuses in the county, to be forwarded to the state legislature with a request for an investigation by higher authorities. Interested persons please call at the *News* office.

Gil Hudson's jaw set and, carrying the item, he moved to the type case and began swiftly to set it up. A sense of satisfaction came to him when the little story was in type and in the form. He saw clearly now that his tool was not his editorial powers, whatever they might be, but in the simple news that someone was willing to take it upon himself to call statewide attention to the county's rotten administration.

Gil locked his office at six o'clock and moved through the quiet, hot streets toward his home. He had not forgotten his engagement with Rick Owen. He did not mean to crawfish now, and if he didn't come out of it the little item he had cast in type would never be printed. It was in the lap of the gods, and Gil Hudson was willing to take his chances.

AS WAS their habit, he and Sam had their supper together in the old man's bedroom. When they had finished, Gil said, "I've got to work tonight, Dad. That's the trouble with being a one-man newspaper. Anything you want?"

Sam shook his head. "Nothing, except to get off my lazy backside. Damn that old goat of a doctor and his orders. Did I have an old turkey waiting to cash in his chips, I'd tell him to get a job on some spread riding the rough string and go out happy."

Gil grinned at him. "I expect you would, at that."

"Danged if I don't envy Andy up there chasing bang-tails out of the brush," said Sam, a reminiscent light in his eyes. "I picked up many an extra dollar myself that way, when I was a young sprout. I wish I could go out and watch when they get ready to gentle 'em."

A pain shot through Gil. What would be old Sam's lot if he was destined to lose his other son? Yet he knew that it was too late to change that now. He could think of nothing to tell his father that might prepare him for what might be shaping up.

Leaving Sam, Gil passed through the kitchen and he talked with old Martha Quillen on the back porch, too removed for Sam to hear. "Martha, the teakettle is starting to boil. Promise me that if anything happens to me like happened to Andy, that somehow you'll keep old Sam from knowing it."

She looked at him gravely. There was a woman's natural worry in her eyes. Yet there was the courage that was shared by

all women on the frontier. "You can depend on it, Gil," she answered.

Gil spent that evening with Hanna, for the first time in his young life feeling the loneliness of a man who is at the point of a decision beyond his control. She seemed to sense the deep worry in him. Finally, she demanded bluntly, "Gil, what it is?", and at his shrug of denial, continued, "Gil, I've been feeling ashamed of myself for trying to crowd you in a situation as dangerous as this one. I was over to see Sam, this afternoon, and Martha explained what you had conspired to do to keep him from learning about Andy. I know now that that's what has tied your hands, and I think you're fine for not trying to hide behind that when I was ranting at you about it."

Gil laughed, then, easing tremendously. He took her in his arms and for a moment they were silent and it was all as it had always been. He knew now that he had hungered for this, wanting there to be no cloud on their relationship before he took up his responsibilities. Afterward they talked casually, deliberately avoiding the subject that was so heavy on each mind. She did not guess what portended for the night, nor did he hint at it in any way. When he left, Gil said, "Hanna, it has made Sam happy to think that you and I are going to be married soon. You're like a daughter to him."

Gil returned to the newspaper office, at peace with himself at last, geared to action. He was grateful for Rick Owen's help, yet he did not want their efforts to be turned to any futile though daring move. He found to his surprise that he could go calmly about the business of getting out the next issue. He took pleasure in it. Again as it had when he had first bought the paper it had significance and worth to him. It was serving its community.

Shortly before eleven, a rap sounded softly on the back door, and Gil opened it to admit Rick Owen. There was a grave look on the young puncher's face, but in his eyes was the excitement of youth when it is aroused.

"Ready, Gil?"

"Ready," said Gil. "But sit down a moment, Rick. We've got to use our heads about this. We're going up to the Golden Bucket, and we're going to try to make it count."

They talked it over, then stepped into the street. A pale moon hung hard above the town, and most of the residences were quiet, their occupants sleeping peacefully. Down town only three or four establishments were open, the hotel and a couple of lesser saloons and the stage office, waiting for the night stage.

The Golden Bucket's bar room was crowded now, and their entry caused scarcely a ripple of interest. Gil let his gaze move over the room, and he noted to his satisfaction that there were a number of independent, decent people here. According to plan, Gil and Rick moved to the bar. When the bartender approached them to take their order, Gil spoke to Rick.

"Thanks, Rick, for telling me about that five thousand Andy had when he came in here, the other night. That gives me something to work on." He broke it off quickly, as if what he was saying was not for the bartender's ears.

He experienced a sense of satisfaction, a moment later, when the bartender slipped out from behind the long bar, down the room, and turned through a door. Gil knew that he was going at once to Nick Cullen or Pete Braxton, for the bar was one of their listening posts. The next move was up to them.

The neat movement of cause and effect was demonstrated within a few minutes, when Braxton came out the door through which the bartender had disappeared. He tried to move casually, yet Gil noted the tension in his face. Braxton glanced idly around the room, then his cold eyes paused as they gazed at Gil. He crossed to them and gave Gil a false smile.

He said, "It's a little unusual to have our editor here. And armed."

Gil shrugged, not responding, and Rick Owen kept out of it.

Braxton brushed ashes from his cigar and stared at the weed thoughtfully. "Like to look the place over, Gil? Ever been upstairs?"

"Why, yes," said Gil. "I was up there the other night."

"Perhaps you'd like to see it under pleasanter circumstances," said Braxton.

"Sure. Why not?"

On the second floor, Braxton turned down the hall.

"I thought we were going up to the attic," Gil said.

Braxton gave him a thoughtful glance. "Let's step into my room, fella. We're going to have a little talk."

Gil acceded. It didn't matter how it went from here on.

Yet there was no one here. Braxton motioned to a chair. "Sit down, boys. Care for a drink?"

"No thanks," said Rick. "We're particular who we drink with."

Braxton cast him a hard look. "I hear you two were making strange talk down at the bar, a moment ago," he said. "I've got a hunch you wanted it carried to my ears. What's this about Andy Hudson bringing five thousand dollars into the game, the other night?"

"What do you care?" snapped Rick. "I thought Sid Farley ran that room."

"The whole shebang operates on my money, youngster," said Braxton calmly. "It sounds a little like you're trying to rig some yarn to cast suspicion on the house. What do you expect to gain?"

"To clear Andy's name, for one thing!" Rick said hotly. "And to kill off the mad dogs who killed and disgraced him!"

"That would be a tremendous undertaking," said Braxton. At that moment the door opened. Sid Farley, the gambler, and Nick Cullen, the hotel operator, came in. The third man to enter the room was Henny Gilstrap, who was widely known to be Braxton's special expert gunman.

WHEN the newcomers had settled warily into chairs around the room, Braxton lighted a fresh cigar, meditated a moment longer, then said, "Well, let's have it, Hudson. What did you come here for?"

Gil was gratified to find that he was wholly relaxed, though underneath it was the tension that would bother any man. He said, "I guess Rick told you. We know why you killed Andy. He simply had won too much money at that table up there, which Farley has rigged to pay the percentages to the house. I'm putting it up to you, Braxton. Farley and Gilstrap wouldn't volunteer for the chore, but you might be able to force them to. I want a confession from them as to what really happened, or I'm going to do my damndest to pull your whole organization down upon your own head. You can take your choice."

There was a sneering look on Braxton's fleshy face. "You're making yourself a sort of editorial Sampson, are you? Fellow, your hair looks too short to me. How do you suppose you'll do this house-tumbling?"

"By going to the state legislature," said Rick.

Braxton snorted. "You couldn't get anybody in the state capitol to listen to a lot of unfounded griping. They'd ask you for substantiation. They'd have to. And just remember that my ticket was voted back into office in the last election, in spite of your dinky little newspaper!"

"I know that," Gil agreed. "But you've left a lot of tracks, Braxton. A man could gather them together so they make sense, and a picture that won't look good for you. Force Farley and Gilstrap into admitting what actually happened, up there the other night, or I'm going to tackle it."

"You're doing nothing, Hudson!" Braxton snapped. "I'm not even going to have

you trying it. I knew I should have done something about you a long time ago, but when you quieted down after the election, I thought maybe you'd got sense."

Sid Farley was watching him closely, his gambler's face a mask, but his cold eyes reflecting all that was in his mind. Across from him, the gunman Henny Gilstrap had drawn his lank body into a half crouch on his chair. Nick Cullen, the hotel operator, was watching with what seemed to be indifference.

Rick Owen, whose reflexes were much closer to the surface than Gil Hudson's, took the situation in hand then. His right hand stabbed toward his gun and lifted it. His parallel in the springlike action was in Henny Gilstrap, who sat across the room. Gilstrap fired without rising, yet immediately slid out of his chair as Rick's bullet went through his chest.

Gil had pulled his own gun, jumping back into a corner, giving Rick the other, which gave each only his front to watch. Yet the elation that comes so often with the fight for survival lifted in Gil when he saw that the murderer was hit mortally.

Anticipating this, Braxton had swung in behind his heavy desk and was crouched there now, cut from sight. Farley, the gambler, had flung out of his chair to flatten on the floor, though it gave him no more protection than Hudson and Owen had. Nick Cullen had wheeled open the door to a closet near him and whipped into it and closed the door nearly shut.

Gil fired at Farley and saw him twitch and grow still. The gun in the closet exploded, and out of the corner of his eyes Gil saw Rick Owen slip and flop to the floor. It left him alone, facing two men. Braxton still crouched behind his desk, not daring to rise and trigger. Gil sent two slugs into the desk, hoping they might penetrate. He was stepping continually now, weaving to avoid the gambler's gun.

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He heard a deafening blast, blackness assailed him, and he went down. . . .

HE HAD no sense of elapsed time when consciousness returned. He felt pressure under chest and shoulders and opened his eyes. He was face down on the floor, with blood pooled under him. He lifted exploring fingers to his aching crown and found clotting blood there. He had been amazingly lucky, not only in the fact that the shot that had dropped him seemed only to have grazed his head, but in the fact that they had not drilled him while he was out.

He couldn't understand that.

There were a dozen men in the room, and through the forest of legs, Gil saw that old Doc Lornet was bending over the slumped figure of Rick Owen. Relief welled in Gil when he saw Rick move an arm.

He heard a yelp of pain and a hearty curse from Rick Owen, then, and the doctor rose with a grim smile on his long face and came toward Gil. He said, "So you came out of it. I've got to sew you up, Gil. Feel like taking a short walk over to my office?"

Gil nodded, and the doctor helped him to his feet. He stood there dizzily, then saw that Pete Braxton sat in a chair across the room, apparently untouched. Near him was Nick Cullen. Frank Villard, the night marshal, hunkered on the other side of Braxton.

Doctor Lornet did not speak until they were in his office and he had sterilized and sutured the ripped wound in Gil Hudson's scalp.

"You were damned lucky, fellow!" he said, finally.

"What I don't get," said Gil, "is howcome Braxton didn't shoot us when he had the chance."

The doctor was tight-lipped when he spoke. "There was a darned good reason, Gil. I came into the Golden Bucket just as you and Rick started upstairs with Braxton. Naturally, I worried about it. And when the shooting started, I went up those stairs on the gallop with my sixgun in my hand. When I kicked open the door to Braxton's rooms, there stood Braxton with a gun leveled at your head. On the point of cold-blooded murder. I caught him red-handed, and he tried to put what face on it he could by claiming he was just wanting to see that you weren't playing possum. Another three seconds, boy, and you'd have been dead."

Gil nodded soberly. "But I still don't see why he didn't have Villard lock us up. After what happened, he could have railroaded Rick and me both by claiming we started it. How did Gilstrap and Farley come out of it?"

"Both dead," said Doc. "He didn't dare try to railroad you, boy. He knew I'd tell exactly what I saw when I came into that room. So when the others busted in behind me, he explained that Henny Gilstrap had started it when Rick made a remark he didn't like. He said there'd be no charges. Pete Braxton played it real smart, Gil."

"How bad did Rick get it?" Gil wanted to know.

"I told a couple of the boys to take him over to my house," said Doc. "He's drilled through the shoulder and I'm worried about a lung. I'll keep him in bed there for a while."

"Lord, Doc! He'll be after your hide, now! And you're out in the country all the time. He'll have every chance."

The old doctor shrugged. "I've taken care of myself in this country for thirty-five years, boy. I'm not afraid of any of them."

Gil knew that was true, yet he also knew that if Braxton struck at the doctor he would do it from the rimrock, or in some other underhanded way. His work was far from finished, Gil saw, though the actual trigger-man who had killed his brother was dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Road Block!

LOOKING at the doctor questioningly, Gil said, "Doc, would you be willing to testify as to what you saw in there? It's about the most clear-cut thing we've had against Pete Braxton so far."

The doctor dropped into a chair and considered it. "On the one hand, Gil, he didn't want me to make that claim and raise another stink against him. He thought it best to simply drop the matter, if he could. On the other, there'd be only my word against his and Cullen's as to what I saw. It wouldn't do much good by itself. And don't think you're not on the spot yourself, boy. Braxton hates you worse than poison now, as he will hate me. I beat him out of one chance to get shed of you or to railroad you, but he'll be watching for another."

By morning Gil felt completely recovered. When he had breakfast with old Sam the next morning, he laughed and explained his bandaged head by claiming an accident down at the plant. "What do you think of a man who hasn't got any more sense to bend under a ledge and forget to back before he straightens? I sure laid myself cold. Doc had to take a couple of stitches." It seemed to satisfy his father. He was a sound sleeper and apparently had heard no gunfire during the night.

Gil had noticed that old Sam, more and more, was losing interest in objective things, turning within himself and his past life. His eyes were not good, and Gil usually read to him, yet he hadn't yet asked for the copy of the *News* Gil would have to censor specially for him.

Gil dropped by the doctor's house on his way to work and found Rick Owen in good shape. He went on to the newspaper office and thereafter worked diligently at getting out his next issue. He wrote another story for the paper, giving the objective facts of the deaths of Henny Gilstrap and Sid Farley.

On Friday the *News* came out again. Gil Hudson waited in alternating moods of hopefulness and dejection to see what effect his little one-inch item would have upon the town and countryside. He kept close to the office, dividing his time between there and his home. Saturday passed with no one making an effort to see him. Those he encountered on the street did not refer to it. Yet they all watched him closely and with masked, though curious eyes.

When half of the next week had gone, with there still being no response to his daring effort, Gil knew the bitterness of defeat. The *News* was still no more influential in the country than it had ever been. Then, on Friday while he was bringing out yet another issue, old Doc Lornet's buggy rattled into town and, instead of passing on to the livery, stopped in front of the office. The doctor swung down, strode across the board walk and into the office. His whiskery old face wore a grin.

"Gil, they're having a dance out on Goose Creek tonight. Dan Wister said to tell you that they'd like to have the society editor of the News out there to cover the occasion." When Gil only frowned at him, the old medico chuckled. "Be there, boy. I think you've got something started. They don't dare to come into town, one by one or in a group."

Excitement leaped in Gil then, crowding out all the dejection of the past days. "I'll be there, Doc!" he said.

At the door, the doctor glanced back. "Gil, to make it look unsuspicious, you'd ought to take Hanna to that dance with you. You're being watched, and if you ride out alone, they'll have a hunch you're rendezvousing with somebody. But dancing is innocent enough."

Gil whistled. "Too dangerous, Doc."

"You think a little thing like danger would stop Hanna?" the Doc asked, and left.

Gil locked the office immediately and hurried down the street to Hanna's shop. She was immediately excited, when he had explained it.

"Of course, Gil, and Doc's right. I'd better go along. We'll wear our best bib-and-tucker and act like any other couple going to the dance. What time will you be by for me?"

"About eight." Gil still did not feel easy about it, yet he conceded that it was the best way to leave town without arousing suspicion.

A LITTLE after eight that night they were riding through the warm, gathering dusk that hung over the desert, toward the fertile bottomlands occupied by the nesters along Goose Creek. The usual bitterness between cowman and nester was not present in this country, and Gil knew that there would be many of the latter ilk there, as well. In fact, a broad cross-section of the county.

It was nearly ten o'clock when they rode into the yard of the Goose Creek school house. From the saddle horses and rigs racked along the fence and in the grove behind the school, Gil knew that there was a large attendance. As they swung down, they could hear fiddle music coming through the night, the drone of loud, high-spirited talk.

The porch of the little schoolhouse and the yard were thick with men, smoking outdoors, squatting on their heels and gossiping while the others danced. Somebody spotted him presently and called, "Hello there, Gil!" and Gil waved a general greeting.

He stepped into the schoolhouse behind Hanna, who went into the cloak room to leave her light wrap. Gil looked around. No one had paid much attention to their entrance, nor had he expected them to. Hanna emerged in a couple of minutes, and they danced.

They had made the length of the floor when somebody tapped his arm. Curly Matthews, who rode for the Hat, grinned and said, "How's to cut in on you, Editor?"

Gil smiled and turned Hanna over to the rider and saw at once that it had been contrived. Dan Wister, who had sent the word to him, stood there by a door that led into a back room. There was an almost imperceptable jerk to Wister's head as he disappeared through the door. Gil followed.

There were cramped quarters beyond the door, for the small room was used mainly for storing supplies and what fuel was kept indoors in winter. Someone had rigged up a makeshift desk at one end and a kerosene lamp burned on it. There were half a dozen men in here. They all looked at Gil closely, some of them smiling, some of them grave.

Wister closed the door, turned to Gil and held out his hand. "Thank God, son, somebody's had the guts to start the ball to rolling." He was getting along in years, a burly man with iron-grey hair and level eyes. He was a local leader, but like so many others in the county he had deemed it suicide to buck the Braxton gang.

Others shook Gil's hand. Ralph Tundra was there. He ran a cow spread over on Willow Creek, and Gil was glad to see that both interests were represented here.

"Well, men," said Gil, with a grin, "what're you cooking up out here?"

Dan Wister stepped to the desk. There were a number of papers there. He gathered them and turned back to Gil.

"Son, here are a couple of dozen of those depositions you advertised for. We've been writing our heads off back here, all evening, and I reckon there's enough in here when you put it all together to tell what's been happening in our country. Look 'em over and tell us what you think."

Gil carried the papers to the light. One

by one he read them, and he saw that what Wister had maintained was true. This man had been threatened unless he and the voting members of his family supported the machine ticket. Another had strong evidence that a supposed natural death had been engineered by the machine. It went on like that, all through the score of depositions, signed and witnessed. In any event it would be enough to insure an official investigation by the state. Once that was started, times over this evidence would be unearthed.

He turned to the group then, a grave smile on his lips. "Thanks, boys. I'll take it to the capitol."

Ralph Tundra spoke up then. "I hope you realize, Gil, that what you've got there is dynamite. If it gets into the wrong hands, it's a death list for all the names there."

"I know that," said Gil. "It's my idea to ride out of here now and head for the capitol and keep going till I get there."

"That's what we thought, too," said Wister. "But there's more danger than you might guess, Gil. That outfit has spies everywhere, which is what has kept us quiet. Measly hombres who are willing to do anything to be in with the right side. We ain't too sure we've been completely secretive about what we've done here, because we've talked to a lot of men and done a lot of persuading to get these. If Braxton's got word of it, he'll know what we intend to do, and he'll do his damndest to stop it. It's my idea that at least a couple of us should go with you. We figured that'd ought to be Ralph Tundra and me."

"You're probably right, Dan," said Gil. A great excitement was running in him now. What he had in his hands was, if placed in the right hands, a gold mine. In the wrong hands there was little question that it would mean sudden and violent death to every man who had dared to affix his signature. "Three'd be better, I guess. I'd be happy to have you go with me."

"We'd better not leave here all at once," said Tundra. "Hanna can stay with my wife, tonight. Gil, you and Dan cut out to the other side of the grove. We'll join up over there. Then burn some country."

The three men checked their sixguns. Wister and Tundra lost themselves in the crowd dancing on the floor and, one by one, melted out into the darkness. Gil spoke briefly with Hanna, who looked at him with excited eyes. When he got his hat, she followed him into the cloak room and there clutched him to her fiercely.

"Gil, you've got to do it, all right. Take care of yourself."

He kissed her, smiled and left. He mounted his horse and swung wide of the grove, and a quarter of a mile beyond waited in a dry wash until the others had joined him. They rode on without speaking and remained a silent group well beyond earshot of the school house. Then they put their horses to a fast pace.

Gil's tension eased as they put ground beneath them. The only way Braxton, if he were warned of this, could follow them would be by direct tracking or laying a roadblock if he could anticipate them. To reach the capitol it was necessary to cross the Little Mano range, and there were only three good passes. He knew that they were far from being in the clear, but it was good to be moving on such a bold course of action.

An early consultation had decided them to take Three Bear Pass through the mountains, which would put them on the Oak City road and a straight run on to the capitol. Daylight found them approaching the pass, and there had been no unusual incident. They rested their horses then beside Long Creek and stretched the kinks out of their own muscles.

The faces of the three men were gray, though excitement still smoldered in their eyes. The horses were tired from the long ride, but there was no chance of changing them until they were across the mountains.

After a two hour rest they mounted and rode on, entering the pass. Five minutes later they rode unguardedly into a bitter ambush. The secret was out and Braxton had roadblocked each of the three passes.

THE trail led up a wide canyon that was strewn with great rocks. The attackers were scattered, and they had put a withering fire on the trail. Long seasoning had caused Gil's party to ride in file and at a distance from each other. This alone saved it from complete annihilation. Gil saw Ralph Tundra, who rode ahead, spill from his saddle and land limply while his horse bolted off to the right.

Wister and Gil swung down, scuttling into the nearby rocks. After the initial fusilade, the firing from above settled down to spasmodic shooting. This was less heavy than it had seemed at first. Gathering his wits, Gil decided that they were up against only a handful of men. As reflection returned, he saw how this must have happened. He had advertised in the paper what he intended to do with the depositions should he be able to secure them. So if some spy had warned Pete Braxton as to what was being undertaken under cover of the Goose Creek dance, he would know that they would probably leave at once in an attempt to reach the capitol.

Unable to determine in advance what route had been taken, Braxton had been obliged to put a road block on each pass route. So they doubtless would have run into an ambush no matter what direction they might have taken. The seriousness of the moment weighted him. It was not only his own life and Wister's and Tundra's, but the lives of everyone whose name was on a paper in his pocket.

He slithered forward across the hot brown earth, exposing himself slightly and hearing an instant slug whine off the rock above him. He squirmed on for two lengths, getting a better elevation. Wister's gun exploded off to his right, and a man poked his head around a rock above to retaliate. With grim satisfaction, Gil drove lead through the top of his head.

Gil was reflecting on the thing with cold objectivity now. He doubted that Braxton could scare up more than a dozen gunmen to block the three passes. Which probably made no more than four men up there above. He had just killed one, which reduced the odds if he were guessing anywhere near correctly. His killing of the man drew an angry burst of fire up there, gun concussion echoing against the steep walls of the canyon. He could see smoke rising, yet not enough to indicate that there were more men than he figured.

Lead whined, ricocheting from the rocks. Once dust kicked up in front of his face, throwing sharp pebbles against his cheeks, causing him to blink. He heard a yell with a certain grim exultation from Dan Wister and guessed that Wister had succeeded in plugging another.

Gil crawled off to his left. The talus here was very gentle but he climbed as much as he could. His progress was punctuated by the rap of gunfire and the shrill howl of lead bouncing along the rocks. He wasted none of his own ammunition. Presently he saw a pair of legs dangling from behind a rock and could not resist the temptation to send in a slug. His aim was good. The leg jerked. A man sat up in an instant of panic. Gil lifted up and drilled him.

He was astonished at what followed. A heavy figure loomed behind a rock directly in front of him. Pete Braxton stood there, yelling, "On your feet, Nick! Hudson's got elevation! We've got to get them fast!"

Nick Cullen rose from nearby and the pair came on at a fast run. Dan Wister climbed up. Thereafter the canyon seemed to rock with gunfire. Gil drilled Braxton, knowing early that the shot was good, for the big politician clutched both hands to his chest before crashing down.

Cullen had disappeared again. Gil and

Wister stalked on. Presently Gil saw that he had been shrewd in his calculations. There had been four of them. Three were dead, and Nick Cullen was stretched out, his face turned toward them and white with fear.

"For God sakes don't kill me, Hudson! I can clear your brother! I didn't have anything to do with that deal, but I knew about it! I'll talk!"

They returned then to Ralph Tundra and found that he had paid for his part in it with his life. It sobered Gil. He and Wister removed their hats. The only consolation lay in the fact that it had cost Braxton his life to make this last desperate play. Braxton would never live to be punished by an official investigation.

They lashed Ralph Tundra's body to his horse and turned on the trail and headed back for Twin Plains. The depositions could be mailed to the state, for there was no urgency now, to make it all official and to justify the killing that had been done.

It was late afternoon when Gil Hudson reached home. He was infinitely tired, dusty and hungry. As he crossed the kitchen, he saw at a glance that there was deep trouble in Martha Quillin. He started to speak, but she looked at him and said, "Go on in, Gil. Hanna's in there."

Gil went into the bedroom. Hanna sat beside the bed, and she was holding Sam Hudson's hand. She looked up and there was grief in her eyes.

Gil's lean frame sagged. "Just now?"

"Just a few moments ago," said Hanna. "But don't worry, Gil. He died happy. I think it's best. We couldn't have kept up the deception forever. He died untroubled and proud of his sons."

Gil nodded. He agreed. And it wasn't as bad as he had always expected it to be, as long as Sam had died happy. He was leaving one son, but he was joining another. ★ ★ ★

"It's no mystery to me!"

SAYS STAN WARREN, PRIVATE EYE

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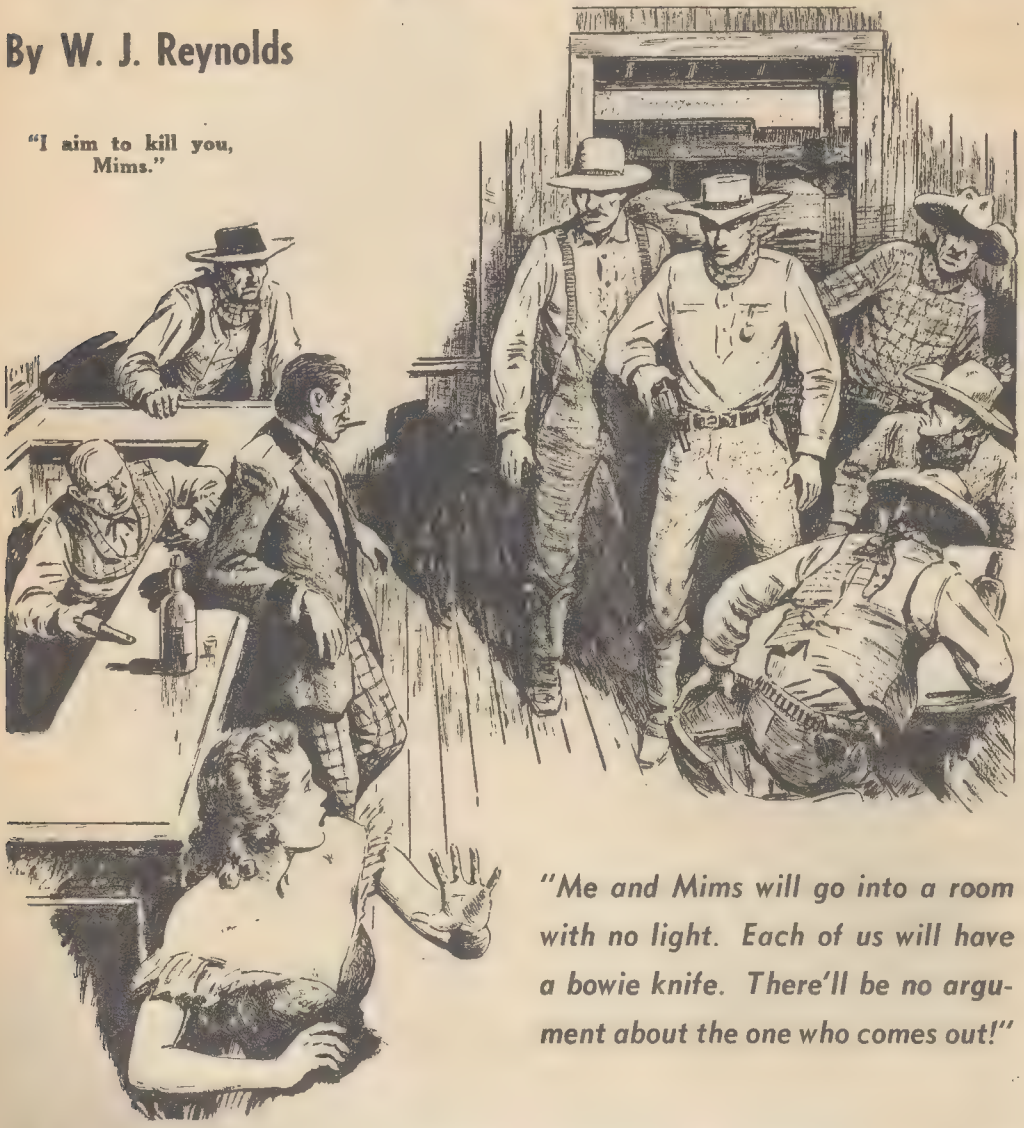
LAST MAN DEAD

By W. J. Reynolds



"I aim to kill you, Mims."

"Me and Mims will go into a room with no light. Each of us will have a bowie knife. There'll be no argument about the one who comes out!"

I SAW the kid when he cleared the post oak flat and came hoofing it up the road toward the house. He was carrying about five pounds of good black East Texas mud on each boot, and it was heavy going after the rain last night. I could tell right off that he was a cowboy, and a cowboy walking was a cowboy with a hole in his pocket. It disappointed me some, for I had about twenty bale-to-the-acre cotton to pick and I didn't relish the idea of picking it all by myself. I didn't figure to get much cotton picked by a cowboy, even a broke one.

I was greasing my wagon, getting it ready to haul my cotton to Old Wingate to have it ginned, and I went right on working till the kid stopped.

"Howdy," he said. "Are you Will Beeson? I'm Jeff Templeton."

I nodded. "That's me, son, glad to know you." We shook hands and I said, "You lost?"

I looked him over, and I liked what I saw. He wasn't more than nineteen, just sprouting horns you might say. But his gray eyes were level and he had a good jaw and mouth. He could carry a man's load. It was my guess that he was back from the trip to Dodge City, and somebody had cleaned him.

"Man up the road said you might need some harvest hands, cotton pickers. I could use a job."

I still didn't shout for joy. "Be too wet now till about middle of the week," I told him. "But I can use you then. Fifty cents a hundred, or forty and board." I looked him in the eye. "You a farmer, son?"

He nodded. "I was raised on a farm in Alabama and made two crops with my brother in Ellis county. I been ranch working for the last year and a half. I just got back from up the trail."

He got sort of tight around the mouth, and I could guess the rest. "And you got took by them slickers in Dodge for your pay," I said. "Well, son, you ain't the first one."

"Wasn't in Dodge," he said, and there was anger deep in his eyes now. "It was right here in Texas, on the train just before we got to Willow Springs. I was a sucker and could have stood that, but they had to frame me and knock me out." His eyes held no bitterness, just anger, a deep steady anger.

"They ride the trains just like they play the towns," I said, seeing he sort of wanted to tell somebody about it.

"It was supposed to be a friendly game, a pass-time, penny ante. I lost a pot for two and a half, and Rorie claimed it was dollars. When I showed fight, one hit me over the head and I woke up beside the tracks. Cleaned."

"Rorie, huh?" I said. "He works for Tully Mims in Willow Springs."

"Yes, so I found out. He'd gone on the trip back to Dodge though, or that's what Mims claimed."

I could understand a little of what the kid was feeling. It was his first trip up the trail, and he had carefully hoarded his money, wanting it for a special reason when he got home. Then right at his home doorstep, you might say, he is trimmed for it by a crook like Rorie, a vulture who preyed on boys like Jeff Templeton. In the kid now would be the burn for revenge, the humiliation of having to face the home folks with empty pockets for half a year's work.

I looked at the tanned, solid face of the kid and knew the answer to my question but I asked it anyway. "You figuring to go after Rorie, Jeff?"

"Yes." It was a simple word that carried its own weight.

Once in a while, I know my limitations. I'm just a middle-aged man with a jag of cows and a jag of cotton. I got a wife and a section of good Texas blackland. The best way to handle the kid wasn't to give him a lot of big, loud advice. Besides, I needed a cotton picker. I hired him.

To be honest, I wanted to help the kid. It always riled me to hear about how those boys were trimmed in trail town. And on the way home too. Most of them took the cowboy rates on the train back to Texas, and those trains were ridden by sharpies, too. It was a long ride, the roundabout way home, and many a lad, like Jeff, was hornswoggled out of the pay he had hung onto in Dodge City. If I didn't let Jeff work for me, then he was the kind who'd just get another job somewhere around, and go after Rorie anyway.

IT WAS Monday evening that Jeff came, and it was Tuesday afternoon along toward night that the girl got there. She had a sleek little bay horse and a raw-

boned dun that had seen his best days, to a wagon. That black mud really had them stretched out. The team was about played out.

She stopped and wanted to buy some corn. I hadn't gathered yet, it was still a little green, but I gathered her two tow-sacksful. She paid me and drove off real quick. The kid had helped me get the corn, and we both stood at the gate and watched her drive off.

"What you reckon she's doing by herself?"

I looked at Jeff and grinned and his ears got red. "We can find out better by staying clear of her less she asks for help. She's running away from something or somebody, you can bet on it. But she won't get much farther in this mud with that team. They're played out. I hope she knows enough not to founder them horses on that green corn."

"Maybe we ought to've mentioned it," he said.

"She was in too much of a hurry, or I would have."

SHE was back at daylight, on foot. She wanted me to look at her team. "I'm camped down the road about half a mile," she told me. "The horses act sort of queer. Colicy and stiff."

"Girl," I said sharply, "how much corn did you give them?"

"Why, all they could eat! They were so hungry after all day yesterday without—"

"You've foundered them horses," I said. I yelled into the house, "Minnie!" When my wife came to the door, I said, "Take the young 'un here and give her some breakfast, Minnie. Me and Jeff will get my team and go after her wagon."

She protested quickly, the fear leaping naked into her eyes. "But I can't! I must be going—I have to. . . ."

"Girl," I said sternly, "you go with Minnie, that's the only place you'll be going now. No telling how long it'll be before that team can pull a wagon. Maybe never, to do any good!"

Some of the alarm left her, and it seemed to take hope with it. She said tonelessly, "All right," and went slowly into the house.

Jeff was about to burst, and was squirming around like a cat on a hot stove. "She's in trouble!" he finally burst out. "We got to help her!"

"What you think we've doing?" I growled. Then I relented and grinned at the kid. She was about his age, or even younger, and even an old codger like me hadn't missed the copper glint under her bonnet, or the wide apart blue eyes. Her mouth would have been wide and soft and plum ripe but for the worry and fear riding her. I could see why the kid was in a sweat.

I was right. She had foundered her horses. Me and the kid brought her wagon in and unloaded some boxes she had her clothes in. She said her name was Abby Sandin, and that she would pick cotton for her board. In the meantime, she pitched right in and helped Minnie with the house work just like an old hand. But I was still uneasy about how much of that cotton I was going to have to pick.

But I needn't of worried. We started picking about nine o'clock Wednesday, after the dew had dried off, and by sundown, Jeff had picked three hundred and forty-eight, and Abby was running him a close second with three hundred and thirty-one. I felt so good that I rashly promised to buy Minnie that cedar chest she'd been pestering me about.

The second day, Abby tied Jeff's weights, and the kid had to quit making moon eyes at her and get to work. Then they seemed to work out a system and picked along together, and got along fine. In a week's time, they were giggling and sparking and I begin to worry if maybe I wasn't going to have to pick a lot of that cotton after all.

Minnie said about the end of the week, "Them kids are getting up a case, Will. A fine looking pair of young 'uns!" Minnie got her silly look.

I snorted. "Won't be so fine if she's running from a husband!"

Minnie flared right up. "Will Beeson, don't you go picking on them young 'uns!"

Minnie is a terrible matchmaker, a single man or a girl, will give her the twitches till she gets them together. "All right, Minnie," I said. After all, Minnie works hard, and gets mighty few chances to practice her profession.

It was a week and a half after Abby came that I noticed the horse tracks about my place, a pair of ridden horses from the look of the tracks. I cursed horse thieves and followed the tracks over my section of land, but had to scratch my head when I found a place in a post oak thicket where they had spent plenty of time, at least half a day.

Somebody had been watching us, and that I didn't like at all.

Then I thought about Abby Sandin, and I couldn't get rid of the idea that those tracks were connected with her. The more I thought of it the madder I got. The thought of my family getting in a fight over her running away, from maybe a husband, didn't set well.

At supper I said, "I saw a couple of horse trails about the place today. Looked like two men give this farm a going over and then spied on the house." I cut my eyes at Abby.

But there wasn't no use in me being sly. She went dead white, and her fork rattled on her plate. She tried to get hold of herself then but it was too late.

"Abby," I said right sharp, "we took you in here and treated you right far as I know. Now if you got some real trouble that might get other folks involved, I reckon you'd better speak up! Who do you figure them horsebackers are?"

"Now, Will—" Minnie begin.

"I'll handle this, Minnie!" I said and Minnie hushed. I was getting mad and Minnie knew it. "Well, girl?"

She bit her lips then spoke right up. "They're after me," she said. "I was trying to get away from Tully Mims in Willow Springs, but I suppose it's no use. Those horsemen are likely Mims and Rorie trailing me."

The kid leaped to his feet. "That blob-nosed card cheat—"

"Kid," I said, "sit down!" He did, and I looked at Abby. "You reckon maybe we'd better hear about this, Abby?"

"Yes, I should have told you. It would be like him to hurt someone here."

Abby had been left without support a year and a half ago when her folks were both killed in a runaway livery hack. Having no folks, she did anything she could to live, mostly washing and baking. Then Mims begin pestering her to come work for him, sing in his sucker trap. She refused, but he was insistant, and finally Mims passed the word around that Abby wasn't to be given any more washing or baking jobs. Rorie and other of Mims' toughs had enforced the order. When Abby had tried to get farm work, chopping or picking cotton, he'd stopped that too. Rorie had almost killed a farmer over it. Abby, to eat, had been forced to sing in Mims' Palace.

After six months, Mims had put on pressure of another kind. He wanted Abby to marry him. When she spurned him, he withdrew the marriage offer, but not the pressure. Desperate, knowing she couldn't hold him off much longer, she had secured the aid of the liveryman, and got the team and wagon she came to my farm in, and when Mims and Rorie were gone, she had lit out. My place was far as she got.

Now they had found her. There was no doubt about it.

Jeff cursed deep in his throat. "He won't get you," he said thickly.

There was a terrible dread in her eyes,

and the look she turned on the kid could have been read by a blind man. "No, Jeff," she said firmly. "There is no use in any of you getting hurt. I'll go back with him." She paused then added in a whisper, "He . . . maybe he'll still marry me. . . ."

"Damned if he will!" Jeff shouted. He came to his feet again, his face white. "He'll have to kill me first!"

"That won't be hard to arrange," a hard voice said. I whipped a glance at the door and saw Mims there with the six-shooter trained on us. "All of you be still."

I DIDN'T blame Abby for running away from him. I'd seen him before, but this was the first time I'd got a real close look. His narrow face was pitted with old pox scars, his eyes were pale and bulged slightly, and they had a mean, fishy look.

"You won't take her, Mims," Jeff said, and I jerked a startled look at him.

Hell was sticking out all over that kid. His eyes glowed like a cat's in the light from the kerosene lamp, and his face looked ten years older. He was a far more dangerous man than he had any idea he was. But Mims would know.

"Easy, son," I said, but I knew he didn't hear me.

I'd known a boy like Jeff once, just a kid. It had been during the war with Hood's Texans. The guerrillas had murdered his brother and done a meanness to the body. That boy is buried in Tennessee now, but so are the four men he tangled with over his brother. Jeff had the same look on his face as that other boy had that day.

"Easy, Jeff!" I said sharply.

I heard the living room door's familiar squeak behind me and looked over my shoulder to see the second man with a gun leveled at us. He was squat, and toady was the word for him. He had a blob of a nose, like a wad of dough. I guessed it was Rorie from what Jeff had called him, a blob-nosed card cheat . . . and he looked it.

"Just make yourselves at home, gents," I said, but it didn't sound near as nasty as I aimed for it to.

"We aim to, farmer," Mims said. "You, Abby, get your things or come without them. You're going back!" He laughed.

Jeff gritted through his teeth, "You dirty, low—"

"Jeff!" I yelled, "look out!" I was still watching Rorie and when I saw his hand tighten on the gun, I kicked hard as I could at Jeff's feet.

Jeff fell as Rorie's gun blasted. Minnie screamed as the bullet shattered a bowl of beans on the table, sending them splattering all over the kitchen. The lamp flared, flame guttering from the concussion. But it didn't go out, and I guess that's all that saved us from a blast of lead.

The kid hit the floor, and lay there groaning. His head had hit the table's edge when he fell, I guessed. Rorie stood squat and glowering in the door, gun jutted and ready to fire again. Abby started around the table to Jeff.

Mims snarled, "Stay where you are, or I'll finish him!" She sat back down, and Mims added, "Get her a horse saddled, Rorie."

Rorie left, and I said, "Mims, you've busted into my house, and you've done too many things for me to forget. And I won't."

His slightly bulging eyes flared viciously at me. "Farmer, just keep talking, and I'll tie you all up and set the house afire!"

He meant it, and I shut up. I don't claim to be a hero, and I don't admit to being more a coward than the next man, but I live seven miles from the nearest neighbor. All three of us would be burned to a crisp before help could arrive. We sat there in silence but for Jeff's soft groans.

Then the kid started flopping around, and finally got to his knees. Mims walked over and hit him behind the ear with the barrel of his gun. Jeff flopped down for

the count that time. I cursed Mims under my breath and promised myself there would come another day.

Rorie called from outside, "All right, Tully."

Mims jerked his gun at Abby, and wordlessly she got up and went outside. Mims followed her, and in a moment I heard them ride away into the night.

Me and Minnie both rushed to the kid. Near as we could tell, he wasn't hurt permanent. There was a nasty gash behind his ear where Mims had hit him, and another on the back of his head where he had hit the table when I kicked his feet from under him. We washed and dressed the wounds and put him to bed.

Later, when he came to, I had to hold him in bed. Finally I had to tie him. He was more than half out of his head, but in moment of sanity, he just lay there and looked at me and wouldn't say a word.

I said, "Jeff, you ain't in shape to go no where tonight. Rest, and then me and you both will go." He looked at me like I'd just crawled out from under a stump.

I untied him next morning while he glared at me. He came up from there with a rush, and made it halfway to the door before he fell flat on his face. Minnie came rushing in and gave both of us a scolding while we put Jeff back to bed.

"Jeff," I told him earnestly, "Abby ain't in no real danger. Mims wants her in good shape to drag suckers into his deadfall. He won't hurt her none till he's plumb convinced she won't have nothing to do with him. His kind, thinking so much of themselves, are hard to convince."

"I aim to kill him," Jeff said through his teeth.

"Yeah," I agreed, "but not today. You go rushing after Mims and Rorie while you're still dizzy, and they'll bury you under a log. Abby wouldn't be a bit better off." He lay there looking at me and I figured I had to jar him. "Why don't you think of somebody besides yourself?"

I thought for a second he was coming up from there and onto me, then he snarled, "Who do you figure I'm thinking about?"

"You!" I snapped. "You think of losing Abby, not of her feelings! You go off half cocked and dizzy in the head and you'll get killed, and what'll happen to Abby later on? She'll end up working in Mims' saloon for fair—upstairs!"

You've seen a dog look at you when he's bad hurt? That was the way the kid looked at me. After a minute, he said, his voice shaking, "What do you want me to do, Will? I've got to do something!"

"We will, Jeff, but first, with Abby in the balance you might say, we'll wait a couple of days for you to get your head cleared. We'll do something." It was a lame promise after the way I'd jarred him, but it was the best I could do.

Jeff spent the next two days in bed mostly, and when he was up, he drew and snapped that Navy Colt a thousand times. He shot some too, and the kid wasn't a bad shot, in fact he was right good. But Mims and Rorie were professional gunmen.

ON THE third day I missed Jeff right after noon meal, and worried about him till nearly night. I was about ready to pull out for Willow Springs when I saw him walking down the road.

To my bellowed question, mostly relief at sight of him, he said, "I been over to the main road. I stopped a drummer going to Willow Springs, and told him to pass the word to Mims that I was coming to kill him."

"God A'Mighty, Jeff!" I yelled. "Are you crazy?" His face went tight and stubborn. I forced myself to simmer down. "Look, son, foolishness like that is for campfire tales, but it ain't the way a man fights who wants to live. Now Mims will be ready with some trickery. He'll kill you dead. You fight gun-battles to win, not to show off, or be noble like you're doing!"

"I ain't a murderer!" he said still sullen. Then he straightened up and give me a straight look. "I'm going tomorrow, and you won't stop me."

"No," I said, "I won't. I'll go with you."

I begin to think of what the kid had done, and the more I thought the more it looked like he had done the right thing. It was a fact that we weren't getting Abby back this way, sitting around. Maybe making the fight public gave Jeff his one little chance to win. If the public was aroused enough to get behind the kid, Mims might be afraid to try much skulduggery. He'd have to stay out in the open and the kid might get in his shot. Mims would still have an angle, but not as bad as a plain murder trap.

"If that drummer passes the word around enough, it might help you," I said.

The kid warmed up a little. "I told him to. Even if Mims kills me, I want to see the public aroused enough so Abby will have a chance to get away."

I disagreed with the kid there, but I didn't say so. If Jeff was killed, then Abby wouldn't care what happened to her. Mims would have enough hold to press his marriage if the public did get aroused. He would get Abby anyway. I figured the kid was worried enough as it was.

"You may be right, son," I said. "We'll start first thing tomorrow."

We did, and it was just at sundown that we rode into Willow Springs. I'd held the kid down to a steady pace when he'd wanted to hurry. At the public square, we ran into Jake Grimm, Willow Springs' deputy sheriff.

"Can't you talk the kid outa this, Will?" he asked me, his loose jaw wobbling.

"Run along, Jake," I said. "Tell Mims to just keep his hired thugs out of this and he'll live longer. Any skulduggery and I'll see he hangs—by mob violence!"

Grimm's face got red and he glared at me. But he had his orders from Mims, for he whirled and strode angrily toward Mims' Palace, and me and the kid rode on across the square to the wagon yard at the far corner. I kept looking around at all the people watching us and felt better. The drummer had spread the word all right, and seemed like every one of those people yelled and waved at Jeff.

But my good feelings were temporary, there was still Mims to face, and he made his living by skulduggery and meanness, and guns. I had begun to think a lot of Jeff, and to imagine him going down under Mims' lead, hurt like hell.

We left our horses in the wagon yard, and trailed toward the Palace saloon, and the crowd trailed right after us. I had to admire the kid. His grin was friendly as he answered their good wishes, maybe it was a little tight, but it was friendly. I didn't even try to grin.

We pushed through the batwing doors and into the saloon.

It was a big place. A long bar ran down the east side, tables and gambling layouts took up the rest, and in the rear was a stage and dance floor. A stairway curved up the west side to enter a center hallway in the up stairs section. I saw Abby standing near the piano on a dias near the stage. She was staring at Jeff and her face was white and strained.

Jeff barely flicked a glance at her. He was watching Mims who leaned against the bar as the crowd pressed back to leave him clear. Jeff stopped ten feet away from Mims.

"You got here, slickear," Mims said loudly. "You bring your bean flip?"

"I aim to kill you, Mims," Jeff said bluntly. He stood solidly, hand near the Navy Colt stuck in his waistband. "You ready?"

THE crowd sucked in a breath, and more than one murmured admiration for the kid, and a few others cursed his dumbness in broaching Mims in his stronghold.

"Don't get in a sweat, kid," Mims said confidently. "We'll make a sporting proposition of this." He rolled his cigar in his mouth, puffing calmly. "We can make it a poker game, or cut high cards!"

"No," Jeff said. "Not your crooked cards, or with a crook like you."

Mims set his teeth for a moment, but he was playing the crowd, the big man who was making light of a kid's vicious threats, probably saving the fool kid's life. "What would you suggest, Kid?"

A man stepped forward from the crowd. "Make it interesting, Mims," he yelled. "Let me take a card for each, the winner gets this!" He twirled a sixshooter by the trigger guard. "The loser gets a hundred foot start—running!"

The crowd gasped, this was getting out of hand. I cursed and in a second the crowd did too, collectively. This man was a Mims plant, another crooked play. The crowd started muttering angrily, and Mims' face got red then white. He was stymied here and would have to give it up.

I looked quick at Jeff. Now was the time to get the crowd solid behind him. But he'd have to make it big. Mims wasn't going to risk his hide if he could help it. Before he'd do it, he'd likely pass the signal to a planted gunman and have Jeff shot down.

Jeff wasn't a fool, he saw the tight he was in, and I wasn't real sure he hadn't known all along. If he got out of here alive, it'd be a miracle. I saw his jaw tighten and his face go a shade whiter, but his eyes did not waver for a moment.

"If it's a proposition you want, Mims, I'll give you one." Jeff partly turned to take in the crowd. "Me and Mims will go into a room with no light. Each of us will have a bowie knife. There will be no argument about the one who comes out!"

It was big enough! The crowd just stared for a minute then they fair lifted the

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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roof with a concerted roar. They were with him and the white-faced Mims saw it.

"You're crazy!" he yelled at Jeff. "A fool kid!" He cut his eyes at the stairway where it entered the hallway upstairs. He nodded.

"Jeff, the stairs!" I roared, and jumped for Mims as the bartender slid a six-shooter across the bar to him.

I glimpsed the gun lift in the kid's hand as a blobby face reared over the balustrade up there. The guns roared as I grabbed Mims, his guns blasting into the roof. I kneed him in the belly, then as he bent over, I hammered a uppercut to his jaw. He dropped the gun and went spinning away.

I saw Jeff fire again and then Rorie reared high over the rail, and wheeled in a slow spin over it and crashed to the dance floor. The crowd for the most part had scattered, but two men had hold of Mims and the saloonkeeper reeled groggily between them.

But Mims was tough. He snapped out of it in a minute, and glared at the kid. "Looks like you win, damn you! You've got too much help. Take the girl!" It was his play, and it took a real close look to see he was scared half to death thinking of that bowie knife in the dark. But it wasn't real anger he showed, it was his false pride. He couldn't stand to be shown up by anybody, much less a kid. But to give Mims his due, the thought of cold steel in the dark would chill nearly anybody.

"I aim to take her," Jeff said. There was a cold purpose in the kid, a solidness that was hard to face. None of the intent faded from the kid's face. Without a far greater experience than the kid had, it took a natural instinct to make him stand solid and unyielding before Mims.

Mims would be in a terrible rage once he was out of danger. The humiliation of tonight would rankle in his crooked soul till doomsday. He would never rest until he had put a bullet in the kid's back, or did him some damage that would cause the kid a searing grief.

Mims saw it, and it was something else he had to swallow for the moment. He shrugged, or come as near to it as he could with two men holding him. "All right if you want a fight, kid. You can turn me loose boys, and have one of the back rooms cleared."

They turned him loose and Mims shrugged his coat back into place and smoothed the sleeves. He almost got away with it. The derringer flicked into his palm and spat viciously at Jeff. The kid turned half around and tripped on his own feet and fell as Mims shot the second barrel and missed.

From the floor, Jeff shot three times, the Navy spurting its powder mushrooms almost to Mims. The hammer clicked then on an empty cylinder, but it was enough. Mims folded and when he fell, he fell with a limpness that was final.

I stood there cursing and gripping my own gun, till I saw Abby rush to Jeff, then I did too.

The kid's entire left shoulder and arm were turning red, and I saw the small hole in his shirt high on the shoulder. If that bullet had hit the collar bone and glanced downward. . . .

But it hadn't. It went through clean, and a half hour later, with the doctor done dressing the wound, I said to Abby and Jeff, "I'll go rent a wagon to go home in, and I reckon I'll see if I can round up a preacher along with it! You reckon you two could put up with me and Minnie till we can build you a house on my south half a section?"

They both got red in the face, but I noticed their hands were tight together. "I reckon we can, Will," Jeff said and they grinned at each other.

I done some grinning myself as I went after the wagon and preacher. It was going to be mighty fine having those two young 'uns there for neighbors. ★ ★ ★

• • SON OF HELL • •

GREETINGS, folks. You've probably already noticed this issue of MAX BRAND'S WESTERN MAGAZINE doesn't contain a yarn by the old master, himself. Well, since the supply of Max Brand's stories is necessarily limited, there are bound to be occasional issues without stories by that greatly-missed writer.

What we're trying to do in this magazine is get together the kind of Western stories we think will appeal to admirers of his work. And, of course, we'll publish Max Brand stories, too.

Next issue, for example, we're going to have one of his finest Westerns, "Wine in the Desert." Also, we'll have Philip Ketchum's thrill-packed new novelette, "Gun Ghost of the Clackamas!"

Here's a short preview of the kind of action-drama it contains:

Grover McCallum, having wiped out all but one of the Bolivar clan, is threatening the Mexican townsfolk of Rio Verde. To protect the villagers, young Sam Bolivar kidnaps McCallum's wife and daughter. Then Sam is captured by McCallum and his gunhands. He lies helpless. . . .

"Where are they?" McCallum asked suddenly. "Where are my wife and daughter?"

Sam looked at this man who was so determined to make himself master of the Clackamas basin. There were haggard lines in McCallum's face. His eyes were red-rimmed, glassy. His lips formed a tight thin gash across his face.

"Answer me, damn you!" McCallum roared. "Where are they?"

He stepped forward suddenly. His boot lashed out and caught Sam Bolivar in the stomach, driving the wind from him. Pain ran through Sam's body. A hoarse gasp tore from his throat.

"Where are they?" McCallum screamed again. "What have you done with them?"

Again that boot lashed out at Sam. The kick was higher this time. It was aimed at his head. It seemed to scrape off the entire side of his face. Sam rolled to his side. He lay there fighting the dark shadows back.

"You'll never learn anything if you kick him to death," said Jake Orphan. "Give him a chance to talk."

McCallum twisted to face Jake Orphan. "When I want advice from you, I'll ask for it," he grated. "Shut up or get out."

Jake Orphan shrugged his shoulders. "I think we all ought to get out of here."

"Who are you afraid of?" McCallum asked crisply. "A handful of Mexicans? What could they do without Bolivar to lead them?"

"I still think we ought to get out."

"Then get out. Any who are yellow can start to run now."

"Don't call me yellow!" Orphan snapped.

McCallum's hand moved toward his gun, then fell away, and Jake Orphan, who had stiffened, relaxed.

"That goes for any of you," said Grover McCallum, and his voice was grim.

No one in the room turned toward the door. The men scowled back at McCallum.

Sam Bolivar was sitting up. McCallum was standing over him again.

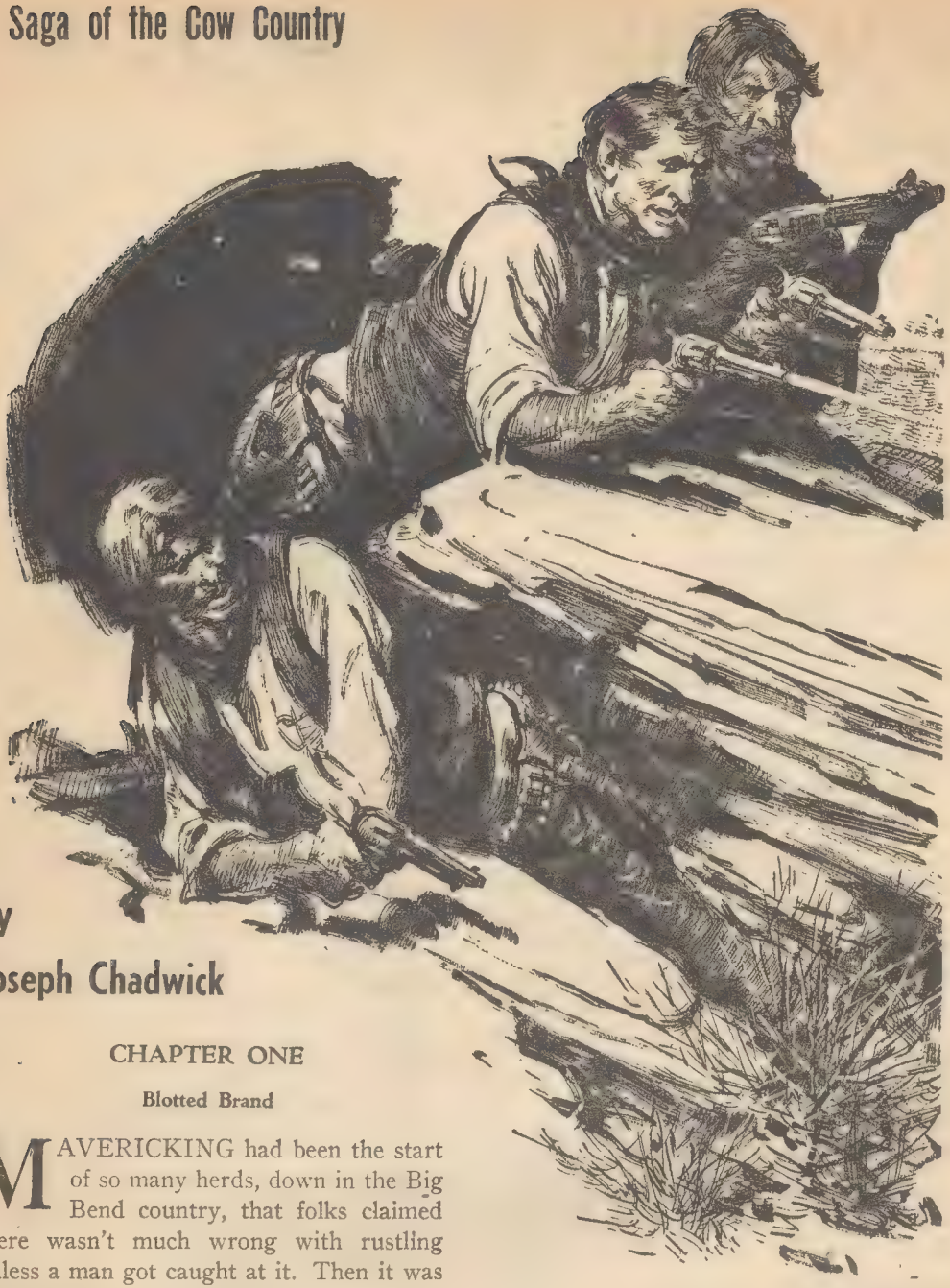
"Tell me, Bolivar," he shouted. "Tell me where they are!"

"Where is my father?" Sam asked bluntly. "Where are my brothers?"

McCallum's boot lifted straight toward his face. Sam rolled away. But he couldn't roll away from the next kick or the one which followed. He tried to cover his head but his arms weren't thick enough. . . .

The next issue will be on sale February 20th.

THE EDITOR



By
Joseph Chadwick

CHAPTER ONE

Blotted Brand

MAVERICKING had been the start of so many herds, down in the Big Bend country, that folks claimed there wasn't much wrong with rustling unless a man got caught at it. Then it was considered a fatal mistake.

Ed Sargent was being careful as he combed the Frio Hills for 2S stock. Ed was a newcomer, and he didn't want to misread brands even by accident. His brother Steve had erred by way of a wide loop and a running iron, so it was claimed, and had paid for his mistake with his life.

That was why Ed, who belonged up in the Llano Estacado, had come south. As next of kin, he'd inherited Steve's little 2S Ranch.

The 2S was located south of the Frios,

KILLER—I'M A-COMIN'!

No man who wasn't invited ever rode onto T-Bar-S land—and came back to tell of it. But Ed Sargent had an overdue appointment with the beautiful owner—and also with her backshooting foreman.

"A thousand dollars to the man who downs Sargent!"

and it wasn't much of a spread for a man like Ed Sargent to bother about. As men went, Ed was of larger caliber than young Steve had been. He was more than just a cowhand. The job he'd quit, on receiving tardy news of Steve's death, was that of manager for the Kimball Cattle Syndicate. He'd bossed a ranch that extended fifty east from the Pecos and seventy miles north and south through the high plains. . . . .The 2S was only a two-bit spread.

In the six months since Steve's death, his herd had diminished almost to the vanishing point. Rustlers had made a pretty

clean sweep of the range, and only strays had escaped them. Ed worked a whole week, with the help of a couple Mexicans he'd hired, to gather less than two hundred 2S longhorns out of the brush. They threw the cattle back onto 2S range, every time a bunch of twenty was rounded up, and by the end of the week they had worked close to Black Canyon.

Here the vaqueros balked, and Mateo Gomez, who was handy with English, said, "*Señor,* we go no farther this way. Black Canyon is Scott range. One does not hunt strays on T-Bar-S range."

Ed Sargent recognized scared men when face to face with them. He had an idea that the pair would quit him if he tried to force them down into Black Canyon. So, not wanting to lose them, he kept hold of his temper. There were many things about this country that he did not yet understand, and the Mexicans might have good reason for staying clear of T-Bar-S range.

He angled down the slope, and the low-walled canyon broadened ahead of him farther into the distance than the eye could reach. He rode into it at an easy lope, for perhaps three miles, reading brands as he passed small bunches of grazing cattle. These were all T-Bar-S cattle. Ed saw not a single 2S critter. He reined in finally by a shallow creek and let his horse drink. There was a big cottonwood nearby, with a short length of rope dangling from one of its lower limbs.

The rope said as plainly as words that a man had been hanged there. Ed looked about for a grave, but saw no mound.

He rolled a quirly cigarette, lighted up, and over the match flame saw three riders coming down-canyon toward him.

THEY spread out, coming within gun range, so that they could cover Ed from three separate points. Ed smiled thinly, noting that, and kept his hands folded on the pommel. The three were armed as he was armed, with holstered sixgun and booted saddle gun. The man in the center was the one to watch, Ed judged. That one lifted his right hand in signal, and the three of them reined in by the opposite side of the creek. About twenty feet separated them from Ed Sargent.

The man directly opposite Ed had a wolf-mean scowl on his ugly-as-sin face. "You got a reason for being on T-Bar-S range?" he demanded.

He had a hooked-beak nose, beady black eyes, a thin lipped mouth that looked as friendly as a steel trap. A ragged scar ran across his left cheek, curving upwards from the corner of his mouth. His eyes were murky.

"Reason enough for me," Ed said. "I'm looking for strays. 2S strays. My name's Sargent. I've taken over my dead brother's ranch."

"You won't find any strays here, mister."

"What makes you so sure? Cattle have a habit of drifting."

"This is Scott range, and we turn back all outside stock," came the flat reply. "You won't need to look farther. Nobody can change a 2S brand into a T-Bar-S, if that's what's bothering you." The scar-faced man leaned forward in the saddle, stared straight at Ed. "But a T-Bar-S can be changed into a 2S—and it's been done!"

Ed's hands tightened on the saddle horn, but beyond that he showed no sign of the rage cutting through him. He had trained himself in self-control years ago, knowing that a man stayed alive longer if he did not let himself be goaded into a gunfight. He knew that this scar-faced man was trying to goad him, or else he wouldn't have mentioned worked-over brands. Ed had heard of the man. He was Matt Faber, foreman of the big Scott T-Bar S, and the man who had accused Steve of rustling. . . .

Looking at Faber, Ed wondered, *Why? What did it get you, Faber?* Ed knew that Matt Faber had lied. Steve Sargent hadn't been a man to steal another man's cattle.

Ed said, "I heard that you claim it's been done, Faber."

"You calling me a liar, Mister?"

"Not yet."

"What'd you mean 'not yet?' "

"Steve Sargent didn't steal any T-Bar-S cattle," Ed said flatly. "I'll gamble my life on that."

Matt Faber sneered, and said, "Maybe you'll have to gamble it, you go around talking like that, mister. The ranchers around these parts protect themselves when they deal with rustlers. Maybe you didn't hear about the Frio Basin Cattlemen's Pool. That's the outfit that deals with rustlers. I showed them the evidence, and they took care of Steve Sargent. You've sure got a lot of good men to buck, mister—if that's why you came here!"

"So you're throwing the blame onto this Pool outfit?"

"I'm just telling you, mister, to take your complaints to the Pool," Faber growled. "If they can't prove it to suit you, then you can come to me—and I'll be ready for you!"

Ed shifted his chill gaze to the other two T-Bar-S men. They were alert, watching him narrowly. He had a notion that it was always like this; a man couldn't catch Matt Faber alone. The man liked the odds to be on his side. But Ed Sargent had come to this country not to work the hardscrabble 2S but to find and settle with the man who had had Steve hanged for a rustler, and he would be patient enough to wait until Matt Faber could be found without gunhands siding him. *Unless,* Ed thought bleakly, *I'm wrong about Steve.* In that case he would have no moral right to gun for Matt Faber.

"I'll see the Pool, Faber," he said. "Just tell me how."

"It meets in Serena every fourth Saturday night," Faber retorted. "You can show up tonight or wait a month. Suits me, either way." His voice hardened, slapped out at Ed. "In the meantime, get the hell off T-Bar-S range. And stay off!"

Ed nodded to that.

He lifted his reins, swung his big gray horse about.

His back felt stiff, as he rode off, and

big as a barn door. He was thinking how easy it was for a man to get shot out of the saddle. But the shot didn't come. He got safely back into the hills, and his two Mexes gazed at him in awe—as though he bore a charmed life.

* * *

Steve hadn't been much of a letter-writer. There'd been one brief note from him a year ago, telling Ed that his brother was quitting his fiddle-footed drifting to settle down. It'd mentioned the Frio Hills ranch, explained that Steve had needed a little more money to buy the spread. Ed had sent him a thousand dollars out of his savings, in the hope that Steve really meant it this time and had sown the last of his wild oats. . . . A second letter, six months later, had seemed proof that Steve was in earnest. He'd written that he was doing fine, and there was a girl he hoped to drop a loop on and put his brand on—a girl he'd only mentioned as Rusty.

Ed Sargent thought of that as he rode the thirty-odd miles to Serena that evening. Neither of Steve's letters had mentioned Matt Faber—or that he was having trouble with any man. Yet, if Ed was right in thinking that Steve wouldn't have turned rustler, there must have been some trouble with somebody—with Matt Faber. One man didn't frame another, get him hanged, without real reason. Faber had borne Steve a grudge.

The girl, maybe, Ed told himself.

But having met Matt Faber, he doubted that. He couldn't imagine Matt Faber having a claim on the sort of girl Steve would have courted.

The few lights of Serena showed just ahead. The towns in the Big Bend country were, due to the sparse population, as small as Ed Sargent had seen anywhere. Serena was a fair-sized general store, a big saloon, a Mexican *cantina,* and a scattering of plank houses and 'dobe huts. But people came from a hundred miles away, many from below the border too, to trade there. And a Saturday night was a big time in Serena.

The short street was lined with saddle mounts and rigs. The women and children congregated at the store, the men at the saloon, the Mexicans at the *cantina.* There were groups of people outside those places. Voices laughed. Guitar music came from the *cantina.* Ed thought of Steve coming to this place on Saturday nights. Steve wouldn't have missed a single one. He'd been fun-loving. . . . Ed swung in before a squat adobe building that stood between the saloon and the *cantina.*

There was a sign over the open doorway—a piece of plank with the words *Deputy Sheriff's Office* burnt into it with a running iron.

Ed could see a pudgy man seated inside the lamplighted place. He was slumped in his desk chair, lazy-looking except for his hands which were busy with a length of rope. Those soft hands were skillfully fashioning the rope into a hangman's noose. As some men whittled during their idle moments, Fat Jeb Reese tied hangman's nooses. . . . Ed had heard about that from his two vaqueros.

Ed dismounted and walked into the untidy office.

FAT Jeb Reese finished the noose before looking up, and Ed rolled and lighted a smoke while he waited. Reese's face was flabby, and so webbed with tiny veins that it had a purplish cast. He had a crippled left leg, which perhaps explained the man's laziness. A horse had fallen on him years ago, Ed's vaqueros had said, and his leg had never healed properly. Fat Jeb Reese, finally satisfied with his noose, lifted bloodshot eyes to Ed Sargent.

"You know, Sargent, I've been a lawman for twelve years and never hanged a man," he said tonelessly. "Hope I never have to."

"You just close your eyes and let the Pool do the hanging?"

"Now that's mighty unkind, friend."

"Well, what do you do as a deputy sheriff?"

"Well, I collect taxes sometimes," Reese said. "And send the money up to Blaine, the county seat. I keep law and order here in Serena, and I try to keep an eye on things out in the Basin. I keep my ears open too. That's how I know about you. The Pool meetings are held in a back room of Cal Jessup's store."

Ed said drily, "Thanks. Is the meeting started yet?"

"Yeah. You're a little late."

"You know a girl called Rusty, Jeb?"

Ed threw the question at him fast, hoping the deputy would be startled into a quick reply—before having time to think he'd better not answer. But Fat Jeb Reese was either too lazy to be startled—or actually puzzled. "Rusty?" he said. "There's a girl over at the Star Saloon called Goldie. But Rusty—" he shook his head—"is one I never heard of." He gazed unblinkingly at Ed. "Should I know her?"

"Maybe. My brother Steve did."

Looking at Reese's eyes just then was like watching curtains being drawn across twin windows. They were blanked out. "There's three girls at the Star," Reese said. "Goldie, she's got yellow hair. The other two have black hair, one being a Mex. A girl called Rusty would be apt to have red hair, wouldn't she?"

"Maybe she isn't a percentage girl in a saloon, Jeb."

"Maybe not. Well, most of the Basin women are in town tonight."

"I'll look for red hair," Ed said. "And maybe I'll see you again."

Reese said, "Drop in any time," and began untying his hangman's noose.

Ed turned to the door, looked across at Jessup's store. He faced around, said, "Did you look into the rustling Steve was supposed to have done?"

Reese nodded. "I was a little late, though," he said. "Matt Faber didn't come to me. He went to the Pool. That crowd went out, saw that some T-Bar-S cattle had their brands worked over into a 2S. They were hid in a draw in the west Frios, about three miles from Steve's ranch headquarters. Twenty head, it was. The Pool members were talking it over when along come four riders. . . ."

Ed Sargent got the picture almost before Reese drawled out the words. It had been almost dark. The riders had come into the draw from the south, maybe up from the border, and they'd been after the hidden cattle. There had been a lot of shooting. It'd lasted for maybe twenty minutes, for both sides had taken to cover. Three Pool members had been wounded, and one rustler was fatally hit. The wounded outlaw had died shortly after the other three were driven off. A Mexican called Black Hernandez, well known as a rustler. He had been known as a member of Jake Durango's crowd of border-jumpers. . . .

"His brother, called Black Esteban, was with the crowd," Reese said. "Some of the Pool members recognized Esteban."

"So the Pool figured Steve was working with this Durango crowd?"

"What else could they figure?" Reese countered. "Steve came riding up while the shooting was going on. The Pool members grabbed him. You know the rest, I reckon. They hanged Steve soon as the fighting stopped. He claimed he was innocent until his last breath." Reese paused, shook his head. "Me, I heard about it the next day," he went on. "I didn't like it. I still don't like it. If Steve had been working with Jake Durango, why'd he go pull a damn' fool stunt as changing those brands?"

"He was framed," Ed said flatly. "You know that, Jeb."

"Why?"

"I don't know yet. But so help me, I'm going to find out."

"You figure Matt Faber framed him—hid those T-Bar-S cattle with the worked-over brands in that draw?" Reese asked. His pudgy hands were busy, tying another hangman's noose. "You know Faber's boss—Tracy Scott?"

"No."

"Interestin' person, Tracy," said Fat Jeb Reese. "Look, friend; close the door when you step out. Will you? Thanks. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Tracy Scott

JESSUP'S store was a two-storied 'dobe in front and, in the rear, a low plank building. Ed Sargent walked back along the side, found a rear door. Yellow lamplight and the hum of voices leaked through the cracks edging the door. The one window Ed noticed was curtained over with a blanket or a canvas. Evidently the Pool didn't want outsiders to look in on their meetings. The door was locked on the inside, no doubt by a wooden bar, so Ed kicked at it.

Silence clamped down inside.

Then a voice growled, "Who is it?"

"Sargent's the name," Ed growled back. "Come on, open up!"

The voice held a whispered conference, then the door was opened. Ed stepped in, shoving back a sandy-haired man. The door was closed and barred behind him. Ed squinted against the glow from two big overhead lamps. Apparently the back building—Jessup's wareroom, judging from the clutter of merchandise stacked about—was kept ready for such meetings. About half of its space was given over to rows of benches that faced a plank table. On the wall behind the table was tacked a crudely painted banner that read:

THE FRIO BASIN CATTLEMEN'S POOL
A Protective Organization

A mirthless smile curled Ed's lips as he read that sign. He stared around the room.

A gaunt man with snow-white hair, mustache and goatee stood behind the table. He was obviously the chairman of the meeting. About thirty men filled the benches—their backs to Ed, but their necks twisting so that they could get a look at him. All except Matt Faber were strangers to Ed Sargent, since he was only a week in the country. But strangers or not, he hated their guts. Some of them had taken part in Steve's hanging.

"Well, Mr. Sargent," the white-haired chairman said. "What do you want here, now that we've let you in?"

"I want an answer to a question."

"You have the floor to ask it, sir."

"Thanks," Ed said drily. He noticed that some faces had turned from him, as though to hide something from him. "I want to know if any man involved in the hanging of Steve Sargent had reason then or since to doubt the evidence against him."

There was no answer.

There was no sound in the place except for one man's asthmatic breathing.

Matt Faber was turned half about, looking back, a twisted grin on his scarred face. The man beside him—a small man, judging him by his shoulders—faced the other way. He wore a pearl gray Stetson with a flat-crown and a narrow brim. Ed wondered, *Tracy Scott?* He looked back at the oldster who was the meeting chairman.

"Thanks for giving me the floor," he said. "I didn't expect to get an answer. Guilty men seldom admit their guilt, and men who make mistakes aren't much more talkative."

"I advise you, Mr. Sargent, to drop this matter."

"In time," Ed said, meeting the chairman's faded eyes. "After I've found out if Steve Sargent was the man who changed the T-Bar-S on those stolen cows. There's another question I'd like to ask. Two of them, in fact."

The chairman nodded.

"Does any man here know a woman called by the nickname of Rusty?"

"Dammit, Sargent!" Matt Faber yelled, jumping up. "What do you figure on doing—dragging a woman into this?"

Ed hadn't expected anything like this.

Matt Faber was crazy mad. He looked wild enough to grab out his gun and start shooting. But Ed was aware of something equally strange. Men were looking at each other, asking each other a silent question. It was evident that none of them knew the girl called Rusty. Fat Jeb Reese knew her. Matt Faber knew her. Steve Sargent had known her. But nobody else seemed to know her. A couple of men had jumped up, were restraining the crazy-mad Faber.

Ed's face was rocky.

He said, "My last question—Is T-Bar-S's owner, Tracy Scott, here?"

Matt Faber shouted, "Damn you, Sargent!" and tried to break loose of the men who held his arms. The man seated next to him on the bench now rose and slowly turned. And said hollowly, "I'm Tracy Scott."

Only it wasn't a man.

It was a red-haired girl.

HER hair was reddish brown, a rich auburn. Ed could see enough of it, beneath her pushed back hat, to be sure of that. But it was red enough for a man like Steve Sargent, who'd always given nicknames to people he liked, to call her "Rusty."

She was a tall girl, clean limbed, her features cameo-perfect.

She had green-gray eyes that now were frosty, and she said coldly, "What is it you want to say to me?"

Ed was slow to get over his surprise. He silently cursed Deputy Sheriff Jeb Reese for not having warned him, but then realized that perhaps Reese hadn't been sure that Tracy Scott was the girl Steve had called Rusty. Anger took hold of Ed. He had trouble holding it down. He knew now that Steve had died because of this girl, that his death had been murder, and that Matt Faber, who had wanted Steve dead, had fixed it so that it didn't look like murder.

Faber was quiet now, with the two men holding his arms. But his beady eyes were ugly, and gazed unblinkingly at Ed. The other Pool members were taking this all in, but they were bewildered. They needed time to think it out, talk it over. But finally they'd understand. They would realize that Matt Faber had used the Pool to murder a man he, for some reason, had been reluctant to kill with a gun.

Ed thought, *Well, what am I going to do about it?*

He looked back at Tracy Scott, and saw fear in the depths of her green-flecked eyes. He knew then that he couldn't come out with it, not in front of all those men. It wasn't something he could do to a woman. Too, he had no evidence that she was guilty along with Faber. It might be that if Steve had been in love with her, she had been in love with him. No, he couldn't hurt her without being sure she shared the blame.

"I made a mistake," he said. "I thought Tracy Scott was a man."

He saw relief replace the fear in Tracy's eyes.

He saw Matt Faber relax, saw a sneer come to his homely face.

Ed said, "My brother was murdered. You and I know that, Faber. When the rest of the Basin knows it, I'll settle with you. I swear that you'll hang. Only it'll be a legal hanging, for you!"

"Talk like that, mister," Faber said thinly, "will get you a bullet through the guts."

The girl said sharply, "Matt, be still." And the white-haired man over by the table broke in, "None of that, Faber." He spoke with authority, like a judge on the bench. "It's been a rule for years that there's no shooting in Serena. I warn you not to break it." He shifted his gaze to Ed Sargent. "That goes for you too, friend,"

he stated. "Deputy Sheriff Reese is our friend, and we don't make trouble for him. Besides, the town is full of women and children. They are not to be witnesses to a shooting. You understand?"

Ed nodded, and said, "I want to see Matt Faber hanged, not shot."

Faber muttered, "You can't call a man a murderer, and get away with it, mister. But I'll wait. I'll find you outside town!"

He said it to Ed Sargent's back.

Ed had turned to the door. The sandy-haired Pool member opened it for him.

* * *

Fat Jeb Reese was standing in his office doorway, his hands still busy with the rope. Two riders came into Serena at a gallop, pulling up at the *cantina*. They were Ed's vaqueros, Mateo and Pablo. Ed crossed the street, halted by his horse, rolled a smoke. Reese gave him a lazy look.

"Tracy Scott has a kind of red hair," Ed said, low-voiced. "She's the sort of woman men get into trouble over. She really owns the T-Bar-S?"

"Her father died two years ago," Reese drawled. "Pat Scott had no sons to leave the ranch to. He left a will. Tracy owns the T-Bar-S, all right."

"Matt Faber?"

"He was in the will," Reese replied. "He was given five thousand dollars in cash, and his ramrod job for as long as he wants it—or until Tracy marries. The will said that if Tracy's husband shouldn't want Faber, he can let him go for a consideration equal to a year's wages. Tracy's saddled with Matt until her wedding day."

"Things are getting clearer, Jeb. Tell some more."

"Ain't more to tell," said Reese. "Except maybe that for a good-looking girl, Tracy don't draw suitors."

"She drew Steve Sargent."

"So you say, friend. I never heard any talk that Steve sparked her, and in these parts folks gossip when a man courts a girl."

"Still, Steve was in love with her."

"Takes two to make a fight or a courtship, friend."

Ed nodded to that, but said, "Steve was a handsome sort, and he had a way with women. I'll bet you as much as you earn in a year, Jeb, that Steve and Tracy were seeing each other—maybe secretly. Faber found out about it. He figured Tracy might be thinking of marrying Steve, so he was scared he'd lose out at T-Bar-S. He had to get rid of Steve—in a way that would keep the girl from knowing he did it."

"I'm no gambling man, friend. Can't be on what I earn."

Ed gave him a thin grin. "You just don't want to bet against a sure thing," he said, then turned as he heard a rider swing away from the store across the street.

It was Tracy Scott on a paint pony.

She swung over, reined in, and gave Jeb Reese a friendly smile.

She turned to Ed Sargent with no smile at all. "Mr. Sargent, I'm expanding the T-Bar-S," she said evenly. "I'd like to get hold of the range south of the Frio Hills. Would you be willing to sell out to me?"

"Maybe," Ed replied. "After I've thought it over."

"How long will that take?"

"I guess you know," Ed said. "Until I've settled what brought me here." He dropped the quirly butt, ground it under his boot heel. "If you figure I'd leave here after selling the 2S, you figure wrong. I'll be around until I finish with Matt Faber."

She made an impatient gesture. "That'll get you nothing," she said, her voice no longer evenly pitched. "If a mistake was made, it can't be made right."

"Mistake," Ed sneered. "That's a queer thing to call Steve's hanging." He saw her wince, and was sorry he'd said that to her. "I don't know how you felt toward him," he added, more gently. "But he was my brother. I can't ride away from here with-

out avenging his death. An' that's final."

"There's something you don't seem to have considered."

"What's that?"

"That you may not ride away at all," Tracy said bleakly.

From a man, that would have sounded like a threat. From this girl, it seemed like a warning. Ed Sargent had not such control over his feelings that he failed to experience a moment's chill uneasiness. He heard Jeb Reese stir uneasily, there in the doorway, and he turned to look at him. Reese was staring beyond him and the girl, a frown on his pudgy face. Ed swung back the other way, and saw Matt Faber standing spread-legged, thumbs hooked in gunbelt, in the middle of the street.

"Tracy, we're riding for the T-Bar-S—right now," Faber muttered.

The girl gave a start, twisted in the saddle, looked over at the man. She shuddered, and said, in something like panic, "In a minute, Matt. I'll be ready in a minute."

"You're as ready now as you'll ever be," Faber retorted.

"I've got to talk to this man—"

"You've got nothing to say to him. Nothing at all. Savvy?"

"About his selling the 2S to the T-Bar-S!"

Faber's murky gaze jumped to her, and he said, "What's that?" He seemed surprised, puzzled too. Then he shook his head. "That won't work," he told her. "His kind can't be bought off—except with lead. Turn your horse and ride out. I'll follow you."

The girl had a beaten look suddenly. She lifted the paint's reins.

Ed stepped forward and took hold of the animal's reins, pulling its head down. He was facing Matt Faber, however, and his right hand was free. "She stays until she's ready to leave," he said flatly. "She stays all night, if she wants to. And she talks to me or to any other man, if she wants that. Now do you savvy, Faber?"

A wicked look came into Matt Faber's eyes.

Jeb Reese said, "No gunplay, Matt! You hear?"

Faber heard. "I don't need a gun for this," he said.

And he came lunging forward.

TRACY SCOTT gigged her paint horse about, and cried, "Les—Whitey, keep out of this!" to the two T-Bar-S men who came running from the Star Saloon to side Matt Faber. Even as Ed heard her words he absorbed Faber's ramming attack. The T-Bar-S foreman crashed into him, shoulder to chest, knee to belly, and staggered Ed back—all the way back to the 'dobe wall of Reese's office.

The pain cut sharply through him, knotted up in him, bent him half over. He slumped against the wall, gasping, his eyes blurred. And Faber didn't wait. He stepped in, laughing deep in his throat, and worked at Ed's face with slashing blows that were meant to punish and mark him.

Faber didn't want to knock him out.

He wanted to give Ed Sargent a beating, and he knew how to go about it. He struck out again and again, his knuckles raking. Blood oozed from Ed's split lips, gushed from his nose, trickled from a cut over his left eye. He hung there, taking the slashing, so that the pain unknotted in his abdomen.

He heard Jeb Reese mutter, "Sargent, for God's sake—"

And Tracy Scott cry, "Matt, don't—please don't!"

The pain and the wave of sickness that accompanied suddenly let up. Ed ducked his head, let Faber's next blow slip over his shoulder. He shoved away from the wall, driving Faber backwards with blows to the body. The T-Bar-S foreman grunted, dropped his hands to protect his middle, and Ed shifted his punches to the man's face.

He hit Faber one solid blow between the

eyes, after half a dozen to the chin and jaws, and it staggered the man. Faber stood swaying, his eyes dull, unable to get his fists up.

"A good time maybe to beat the truth out of you, Matt!"

"Try it," Faber mumbled, and still didn't get his fists up.

Ed did the slashing now, but Matt Faber took the punishment. He wouldn't go down, and he wouldn't cry out that he had enough. He reeled under Ed's punches, his face battered and bloody, but his iron will kept him erect and silent—until Ed Sargent sickened of it.

People were watching from all around when Ed stepped back, and two T-Bar-S riders stepped forward and took Matt Faber by the arms. They steered him into the Star Saloon. Ed pulled out a bandana, wiped blood and sweat off his face. His knuckles were barked, his hands ached. His face throbbed with pain, and there was a numbness in his abdomen. He'd found out something: Matt Faber was the toughest man he'd ever come up against. He looked around for his hat, picked it up, moved unsteadily to his horse.

Tracy Scott watched him intently. When Ed looked her way, she said, "I can see it now, there's no use talking to you." She swung her paint pony about and rode away.

The watching people began to drift, and finally Ed was alone except for Fat Jeb Reese. The deputy said, "No man ever whipped him before, Sargent. He'll try to kill you for doing it, sure."

Ed nodded his agreement to that.

But he knew that Faber had made up his mind to kill him before the fight, in the Pool's meeting-place when Ed had let it out that he was looking for a girl called Rusty.

Ed pulled himself to the saddle, turned his horse away from Reese's office. A man stepped from a crowd of Mexicans in front of the *cantina*, and said, "It was a good fight, *señor*. You are all right?"

It was Ed's rider, Mateo Gomez.

Ed nodded, said, "I'm all right." Then an idea came to him as he looked down at the vaquero. Mateo's face was round, dusky, and lacking in guile. It was almost too honest a face. Ed had noticed before that Mateo's eyes were shrewd, too shrewd for an ordinary vaquero. Without a doubt, the man knew something of the rustling activities on both sides of the Rio Grande. Ed leaned from the saddle, said low-voiced, "How would you like to earn some extra money—say, a hundred dollars?"

Mateo was smoking a brown *cigarito*.

He puffed on it thoughtfully, and finally said, "A man can always use money, *señor*. But how would one earn so much?"

"You heard of the fight between the Durango crowd and the Pool?"

"*Si.*"

"There was a Durango man who escaped. Black Hernandez."

"So it was said, *señor.*"

"I'd like to talk to him," Ed said. "Can you find him for me?" He saw Mateo's eyes narrow down; the vaquero was suspicious. "I don't mean him any harm," Ed explained. "I just want to ask him some questions. Fix it for me to meet him, and the hundred is yours."

"It will take some thought, *señor.*"

"There's not too much time, amigo," Ed said, and rode on.

CHAPTER THREE

The Bushwhacking

MAYBE it was a crazy thing to do, but Ed Sargent rode north—along the road that led to the T-Bar-S. He lifted his horse into a lope, and in less than three miles overtook Tracy Scott. She hadn't been traveling fast. In fact, Ed had the impression that she had expected him to follow her. At least, she showed no surprise as he swung in alongside her. Her face in the darkness was a pale oval. Her

eyes were obscure, and Ed wondered if they held fear of him.

"I'd like a talk with you," he said. "About my brother."

"Matt Faber and some of the T-Bar-S hands are likely to come along," she said uneasily. "If Matt should catch you—"

"Matt's probably getting drunk," Ed broke in.

"No. Not after what happened. You don't know Matt Faber."

"Well, if he's apt to come along," Ed told her, "you and I'll leave the road. We'll keep out of his way."

She was about to protest, but Ed crowded his horse against hers and forced her to turn west off the road. She rode stirrup to stirrup with him for a couple of miles without speaking, but reined in abruptly when Ed said, "You rode like this with Steve, some nights?"

"Please, don't," she pleaded. "Don't make me talk about him!"

"All right; just listen then, and see if I've got it straight," he said bluntly. "Matt Faber's job is safe under your father's will, so long as you don't marry. Matt figures that when you marry, your husband will run him off the T-Bar-S. So to keep you from marrying, Matt won't let you have suitors. He scares off any man who gets ideas about you." Ed's voice grew harsher with every word. "He couldn't scare Steve off. You were seeing Steve secretly. It must have been secretly, because the rest of the Basin didn't know about it. I have Jeb Reese's word for that."

He paused, but the girl remained silent.

"But Matt Faber found out about it," he went on. "He got crazy mad, like at the meeting tonight, and he made up his mind to get rid of Steve. He didn't go gunning for him, because you'd have held that against him. He had to fix it so that you were queered on Steve. So he framed him —and let the Pool hang him!"

"No," Tracy said hollowly. "No, that's not true."

"You know it is, dammit!"

"Steve was rustling T-Bar-S cattle. He was in with the Durango crowd. Everyone knows that."

"You knew him, Tracy," Ed said. "You rode with him at night, met him secretly, let him fall in love with you. Did he seem like a thief?"

"The evidence—"

"Matt Faber fixed that evidence. He blot-branded those cattle."

"They were hidden on Steve's range, and Jake Durango and his bunch were there," Tracy said hollowly. "I liked Steve, but being fond of him didn't mean that I would marry him. Matt asked me about it. I told him that I wouldn't marry Steve...."

Her voice trailed away as she realized that Ed didn't believe her.

"I'll see you home," Ed said gruffly.

"No. I'll go alone."

Ed grabbed the paint's reins as she swung the animal about. "You're scared," he said. "You're so scared of Matt Faber, you can't think straight." He released the paint. "All right, Tracy. Ride alone. But a girl like you—well, you'll get mighty tired of riding alone all your life!"

He thought, was almost sure, that she sobbed as she rode off.

He listened to the drumming of her paint's hoofs until the sound faded into the distance. Tracy was riding hard for the T-Bar-S.

Ed rode slowly southwest toward his 2S Ranch, lost in thought. He knew that Matt Faber had framed Steve—murdered him. And he knew why. But he couldn't prove it to anyone else. He hadn't been able to beat a confession out of the man, and he'd learned nothing from Tracy Scott—except that she was scared.

He might learn something from the rustler, Black Hernandez, and he might not. And if he got no evidence, there would be no turning Faber over to the law. He would have to settle it outside the law—kill Faber, or get killed. It wasn't working out as Ed

had hoped. A gunfight, even one in which he killed Matt Faber, wouldn't clear Steve's name. It wouldn't brand Faber with guilt.

It was well past midnight when Ed came within sight of the 2S headquarters nestling in a bow of the Frio Hills. No light showed from the little 'dobe ranchhouse or the bunkhouse. The two vaqueros wouldn't ride in from Serena until late tomorrow, and Mateo not then perhaps if he tried to contact Black Hernandez. . . . But somewhere in the darkness a saddled horse stamped and switched. Ed heard the rattle of a bit chain.

He grabbed for his Winchester, swung down from the saddle.

He was none too soon.

Guns blazed from the darkness around the bunkhouse—three of them.

Ed's horse screamed as a slug tore into it, fell in a thrashing heap, and then lay still. Ed himself was flat on the ground, but unharmed. He opened fire with the Winchester. There wasn't much hope in him, not with the odds at three to one.

But the ambushers hadn't expected him to make a fight of it. They had figured that three guns would surely bring down their quarry, and now, with Ed's bullets probing the darkness for them, their hope of a bushwhack murder was gone. Even as he fired his third shot, Ed knew that he was safe—for the time being. Still shooting, the three men backed off. They took to their horses at the rear of the bunkhouse, and, only one of them shooting now, galloped off through the darkness.

Ed leapt up, shouting wildly, "Damn you Faber!"

He didn't bother with control of his temper this time. He kept yelling as he ran forward, calling Matt Faber all the obscene names that the man actually was. He halted by the rear of the bunkhouse, swung his rifle up. He fired until its last cartridge was gone, willing enough to backshoot such men. But it was one of those occasions on which much lead was wasted. The ambushers hadn't hit him, and his shooting was no less wild.

When they were gone, Ed found himself shaking with rage.

He had an impulse to catch up another horse, and ride after them. But the few 2S horses were loose on the range, and it would take him too long to rope one. Besides, caution warned him that pursuit would give Faber a chance to rig up another ambush—maybe a successful one this time. Ed let his rage die out.

He had no doubt about it having been Matt Faber and two T-Bar-S riders. By having gone after the girl, he'd given them plenty of time to reach the 2S ahead of him. But that might have been a stroke of luck on his part. If he'd come straight to the ranch from Serena, Faber might have crept up to the place and shot him in his bunk. . . . Ed was sure of one thing. He no longer was safe in Frio Basin. Matt Faber was determined to kill him, and he had at least a part of the tough T-Bar-S crew to help with it.

Ed didn't sleep in the ranchhouse that night.

He took his blankets out into the brush, and slept with his reloaded rifle within easy reach of his hand.

PABLO showed up about noon Sunday, but he hadn't come back to stay. He explained to Ed Sargent, in a mixture of Spanish and English, that he was quitting. He'd just returned for his bedroll.

He was a lean-faced youth and, unlike Mateo, a dull-witted sort. His fear showed in his eyes. And Ed knew, without questioning him, that Pablo had been given his orders by Matt Faber or another of the T-Bar-S crew. He paid him for a week's work and let him go.

Afterward, he got a shovel and dug a hole beside the dead horse. It took him most of the afternoon to get it deep enough. He took a rope and walked out onto the range to catch up a mount. He rode in, bare-back,

then saddled up. He put his loop on the dead animal, and dragged the carcass into the hole. It took him another hour to fill in the grave. He was wiping sweat off his face afterward when he noticed a movement among the scrub timber on the nearest slope of the Frios.

He kept watching and finally made out two riders in the trees, and their presence could mean only one thing. They were T-Bar-S riders, and Matt Faber—if he wasn't one of them—had posted them there to spy on him. Faber was planning another move, and it would come soon.

Ed cooked and ate his supper well before dark.

When darkness came, he left a lamp burning in the 'dobe house and went outside. He carried his rifle, led his saddle horse, and went into the brush again. But he had no intention of sleeping tonight.

There were riders on 2S range several times during the night. They circled wide about the ranch buildings, however, and did no shooting. Ed Sargent remained bushed up, not at all puzzled by T-Bar-S's maneuvering. Matt Faber was trying to bait him into shooting and revealing his whereabouts. Faber was shrewd enough to guess that he wasn't in the lamplighted 'dobe. Maybe too, Ed decided, Faber was keeping riders about the 2S in the hope of wearing him down—and scaring him off.

Ed grinned thinly over that thought, and muttered, "You don't know me, Matt. You don't know me, at all!"

But being bushed up and watchful did a man's nerves no good. Ed knew that in time he'd grow edgy, so edgy he wouldn't be able to sit tight. No matter how patient a man was, he would be apt to grow reckless—or scared—after too long a time under this sort of pressure. Ed began to wish there was some sort of law in Frio Basin, a law other than Deputy Sheriff Fat Jeb Reese and the vigilante outfit called the Pool. A man was too much alone when he bucked this sort of trouble.

The night riders were gone from the 2S when dawn came, but the smoke of a campfire, rising from up in the hills, told Ed that they hadn't gone far. He came from the brush, off-saddled his horse, carried his rifle into the 'dobe. He felt reasonably sure that no attack would be made by daylight, and so built a fire and cooked up breakfast.

He spent the morning watching for Mateo Gomez, and at mid-day saw a rider coming in along the Serena road. But it was Tracy Scott, not the vaquero. Ed recognized the girl's paint horse.

THE feeling that came to Ed Sargent, as he watched Tracy come up, was not one he could control or ignore. It swept through him. There was no explaining it except as a pleasant excitement. A man could look upon a hundred attractive women and not be more than mildly stirred, but then, seeing a Tracy Scott, he was never quite the same man again. Ed suddenly knew how Steve had felt toward this girl. He knew that now he wanted her, just as Steve had wanted her. The realization jolted him.

He stepped forward, invited, "Step down. You've had a long ride."

Something in his voice made her green-flecked eyes widen with surprise. "I didn't expect such a welcome," she said, and left the saddle.

Her hat hung by its chin cord at her shoulders, and her uncovered hair was coppery bright in the sunlight. She gave Ed a slanted look, as he led her pony over to the corral, seemed about to speak but did not. He stripped the paint, rubbed it down, watered it. The animal had come up blowing and lathered. Tracy had been riding hard.

"You've had dinner?" he asked.

"I could do with some coffee," she replied. "Nothing more."

He took her into the barely furnished ranchhouse, put wood on the fire, filled the coffee pot. She kept watching him. Even

when not looking her way, Ed could feel her gaze on him.

She said suddenly, "I wasn't in love with Steve. I never let him think I was. I told him I liked being his friend, but that was all I could be to him. That's the truth, Ed."

Her use of his given name surprised him.

He said, "Why tell me that at this particular time?"

"Why, I—I don't know," Tracy said, looking confused.

Ed's inner excitement increased. She'd told him that because she wanted him to know, perhaps despite herself, that she hadn't been in love with Steve or any man. It was important to her that he understand that.

"Was that all you came to say?" he asked.

"I don't think I came to say that," Tracy replied, carefully avoiding his direct gaze. "I can't imagine why I did say it. I came to ask you, Ed, to go away—now, today." Her eyes met his now, and were frightened. "I've never begged before, for anything, but I'm begging now. Go away, Ed. Please—please ride out of the Basin!"

"What's happened, Tracy?"

"Matt—he's going to kill you!"

"He tried that the other night," Ed told her. "It didn't work." He began to frown. "Did he send you, Tracy? To warn me? Did he figure that your telling me what I already knew would scare me off?"

Tracy shook her head. "No, not that, Ed," she said hollowly. "He just told me that if you're still here at the 2S tonight, he would ride in with some of the toughest T-Bar-S men and smoke you out. He's crazy when he's made, Ed. And he's been mad ever since you talked like you did at the meeting. Ed, please—I don't want to feel guilt for your death too!"

"Why should you? My trouble with Faber is no fault of yours."

"I'm beginning to think I was to blame," Tracy said miserably. "Matt told me last night that if he couldn't have me, no man would." She paused, shuddered. "He wants me, Ed. Matt Faber!"

Ed said thickly, "So that was his real reason for getting rid of Steve." He was a little shocked by the thought of ugly Matt Faber wanting a girl like Tracy, and, knowing he couldn't have her, going mad because of it. Because of his madness, he'd kept her from having suitors. He'd brought about Steve's death because he believed Tracy might want to marry him. And he'd made her live in fear. "You're not sure he hid those brand-blotted T-Bar-S cattle on Steve's range?" Ed asked. "Did Faber ever admit it to you?"

Tracy shook her head. "I'm no help," she said bleakly. "This is what comes of a woman trying to run a ranch—and handle a crew of men. But I know now that Matt is as guilty as you say. I'm going to Jeb Reese or to the Pool, Ed, and demand that something be done. At least ride to Serena with me—please!"

Ed shook his head. He was still hoping that Mateo would come with word that he'd arranged a meeting with Black Hernandez. He said, "I'll stick it out, but I won't let Faber catch me here."

He set out cups, told her, "Have some coffee before you leave."

CHAPTER FOUR

Black Hernandez

ONCE the girl was gone, time dragged for Ed Sargent. He spent the afternoon watching for Mateo Gomez, then, at sundown, ate a meal and packed some grub in a flour sack. He carried it outside, tide it and his bedroll to his saddle cantle. He dared not wait much longer, for, if Tracy was right, Matt Faber would strike at any time after dark. He had to clear out, hide out, and it wouldn't be safe for him to return in the morning.

He saw no signs of riders in the hills,

but had the feeling that they were there. He waited until dusk thickened, smoking a cigarette, and defeat was bitter in him. Tracy would be in Serena, talking to Jeb Reese and maybe to some of the Pool members but nothing could come of that. She had no evidence to offer. Reese and the others would simply point out that she was taking a stranger's word for it—Ed Sargent's word against that of her own T-Bar-S foreman. Ed thought bitterly, *I should have settled it with Faber the other night in Serena with a gun.* That would have avenged Steve's death, even though it wouldn't have cleared his name.

Ed finally dropped the quirly butt, ground it under his boot heel.

In half an hour, it would be dark.

He swung to the saddle, and saw a rider coming up from the south. It was Mateo.

Ed felt a mild disappointment, for he'd hoped that by some miracle Mateo would have managed to bring Black Hernandez with him. The vaquero was grinning, however, when he reined in. "I found the man you wanted, *Señor* Ed," he said. "But I had to ride to Valido, across the border. He came with me as far as Broken Rock Creek, and he'll talk with you—if *señor* comes alone. That is the bargain."

Ed nodded.

"I'm ready to go," he said. "You'd better com along, amigo. Faber and his crew are likely to come here tonight."

They turned their horses south, and it was Mateo who looked back toward the hills. *"Señor—!"* he gasped. "They come now!"

Ed took a backward glance and saw a big bunch of riders coming down from the Frios. He swore under his breath, kicked spurs to his mount. Mateo swung away with him. They headed west, along the road that led to Serena, at a hard lope. After perhaps a mile, Ed looked back again. The T-Bar-S crowd had split up. Some had stopped at the 2S headquarters, and Ed told himself bitterly, *They'll set fire to the place.* The rest of the band—four riders—were coming along in pursuit. But they were not hurrying. Ed thought in alarm, *Some more are coming in by the road!*

He could see no riders ahead, however, because of the gathering darkness and a looming stretch of broken country. With Mateo, he kept on until he reached the rough terrain and then swung in among the rocks and brush. They slowed their horses, being well hidden now, and turned south.

"Maybe we've thrown them off," he told Mateo. "We'll work our way toward Broken Rock Creek."

THEY breathed more easily when full darkness came, and kept to the broken country for perhaps two miles. They swung back onto 2S range then, and saw a bright red glow to the north. Ed had guessed right; Faber's men had fired 2S headquarters. Another mile brought them to Broken Rock Creek, and Mateo called out in Spanish as they slow-walked their horses toward a stand of cottonwoods.

A voice answered in the same tongue.

A man and a saddled horse waited in the deep shadows of the trees. The man wore a peaked sombrero, and there was a serape across his left shoulder. He was a squat, thick-bodied Mexican. His eyed glittered in the darkness. He had a heavy black mustache, blunt features. Ed wished for a campfire so that he could get a real look at Black Hernandez. There was a six-shooter in the rusler's hand.

"Keep your hands on your saddle horn, *señor,"* Hernandez said. "I am a nervous man with a gun, and would not want to kill you. I have no friends on this side of the Rio Grande, even though I am now an honest man with a *rancho* of my own down at Valido." He grinned faintly. "Since I no longer have my *compadre,* Jake Durango, to ride with."

"I know the risk you took, coming here,"

Ed said. *"Muchisimas gracias* for coming."

"I came because Mateo said you are Matt Faber's *enemigo.*"

"You hate Faber, too?"

"Si!" said Hernandez, and swore in Spanish. "He set a trap for us—not far from here. This Faber hombre was Jake Durango's *compadre.* You savvy, senor?"

Ed admitted that he did not understand, and Hernandez explained that for some time Matt Faber had helped the Durango crowd to run off T-Bar-S cattle. Sometimes it had been fifty head, sometimes a hundred. The stolen cattle had been sold in Mexico, and Faber had received a third share of the money. But finally he had demanded a half share. He had always come to a Mexican village on the Rio Grande for his cut, and there had been a fight between him and Jake Durango.

Faber had gone off crazy mad, but later he'd showed up again with a promise of more T-Bar-S cattle—and saying he'd take his third share as before. The cattle were to be hidden in a draw on 2S range, and Durango and his men were to get them on a certain day just after dark.

"It was a trap, *señor,"* Hernandez said bitterly. "Matt Faber wanted to stop being Durango's *compadre,* since he couldn't have half the money gotten for the T-Bar-S cattle. But he was afraid maybe that his people would learn that he had been helping run off T-Bar-S stock—afraid maybe that Durango would talk. So he wanted all of us dead. I was the only one to escape with my life."

You'll tell that to Deputy Sheriff Jeb Reese, Hernandez?"

"Si, if it will hurt that *ladrone,* Matt Faber," said Black Hernandez. "But *Señor* Reese will have to ride to Valido—where he cannot arrest me."

"Fair enough," Ed told him. "There's one thing more, Hernandez. Was my brother Steve a *compadre* to Jake Durango?"

Hernandez shook his head. *"Señor* Steve was new in the Basin," he said. "And his herd was too small for Durango to bother with. Some rustlers ran off his cattle after he was hanged, but Jake Durango was dead then. No, *señor;* your brother had no dealings with us—or lost any cattle to us."

"You'll tell that to Deputy Sheriff Reese?"

"Si, señor. Why not?"

Ed nodded, thanked him again, and said, "You'd better ride out now, amigo. Faber and his men are not far off—gunning for me."

It was at that moment that Mateo, who was keeping watch, called softly, *"Señor* Ed, they come!"

Ed heard a drumming of hoofs.

Matt Faber and his men were sweeping down across 2S range, coming straight toward Broken Rock Creek.

ED JERKED his rifle from its boot, said thinly, "Run for it, Hernandez." And added, "You too, Mateo. It's not your fight." He himself meant to make a running fight of it. And he hadn't much hope of getting away. The Faber crowd was shrewdly lead. The bunch from the hills had expected him to run from the ranch headquarters, so another bunch had been posted out along the road. Matt Faber must have guessed that his quarry had swung south after dodging into the rough stretch. . . . At any rate, the trap was being closed.

Ed could see them now, ten riders looming through the darkness.

Black Hernandez had mounted his horse, but he lingered.

Mateo too had not swung away.

Ed said flatly, "You'd better head out while there's still time."

Black Hernandez said, *"Señor,* I would give much for just one shot at Matt Faber!" He cocked his six-shooter. And Mateo Gomez, drawing his gun, said drily, "He

once gun-whipped me, *señor.* I too would like a shot at him."

"Well, we have a slim chance at least if we can fort up in the rocks," Ed said. "Let's run for it."

They emerged from the cottonwoods, headed east at a hard run, but it was a full two miles to the stretch of rough terrain and already they were sighted. Matt Faber's yell lifted, "There he goes! Take after him! He's got only a couple of gutless Mexes with him!"

Matt Faber was wrong about those Mexicans.

He hadn't recognized Black Hernandez, and he didn't understand that Mateo Gomez was a better man that he looked. And his riders weren't too eager to overtake the quarry. They gave chase, but permitted the three fleeing men to gain the rocks. There were huge boulders and jagged rock formations, and Ed led his *compadres* deep into them.

They dismounted, took cover, and opened fire.

A rider screamed as he pitched from the saddle, another went down with his hit horse. Black Hernandez shouted Spanish oaths, roared Matt Faber's name and called him a hundred obscenities. Mateo fired a little wildly, still not wholly over his fear of the T-Bar-S crew—but game. Ed fired methodically, taking a fatalistic view of the situation. He knew that a man as smart as Matt Faber wouldn't let his men be easy targets for long.

He was right.

Faber got his men dismounted and behind cover. Their guns blazed from as many separate points as there were men, but their shots couldn't reach the three forted up among the rocks. Faber bellowed his orders; he wanted some of his crew to circle about and take Ed's position from rear. And his shout, "A thousand dollars to the man who downs Sargent!" told Ed how he got his men to fight.

But men who worked for forty a month and found were apt to take risks for such a bounty offer. Four T-Bar-S riders began working their way around the position, moving stealthily from rock to rock—sometimes crawling on their bellies. Ed turned his rifle on them, winged one and drove another back. But two went on, vanishing into the darkness. Ed said, "Mateo, watch our rear! They'll open up on us shortly!"

Black Hernandez was reloading his six-shooter, a grim look on his heavy face. He'd hoped for a shot at Matt Faber, had had it and more, yet Faber still moved about out there—untouched, his gun blazing.

Ed too tried to target him, but without any luck.

There was no chance of either Hernandez or Ed getting an accurate bead on the man. The T-Bar-S hands had located their positions and were keeping up a methodical fire. Slugs struck the rocks and ricochetted, probing viciously. One glanced off a boulder, hit Black Hernandez, and he slumped down with a groan. The next instant Mateo cried out and began shooting as fast as he could thumb back hammer and squeeze trigger. The two men who'd circled the position had opened up with everything they had.

A slug tore into Ed's left side, and the feel of it was like the jab of a red-hot running iron. The impact shoved him against a rock, and his knees buckled. He gritted his teeth, desperately willed himself not to fall. . . .

His mind was clear, but his brain reeled under spasms of pain each worse than the one before. Black Hernandez was not dead, but he could not get up. There was only Mateo and Ed, with Ed's strength beginning to ebb, standing in that narrow pit of rock—back to back, guns blazing whenever a target showed. There was hell all around them. Gunsmoke, streaks of powderflame, the crashing shots. Sweat

dripped down Ed Sargent's face. His left side was warm—wet with blood.

There was no hope. There hadn't been from the start.

Ed's rifle jammed. He dropped it, drew his sixgun.

He staggered, weaving, over to Mateo's side of the barricade, and gasped, "Hernandez is done for. So am I—almost. I'll open up on those two—" he meant the men who'd worked around the position— "and you run for it. And don't forget to keep your head low."

Mateo was game still. "I'll say, boss," he muttered.

Ed swore at him, ordered him to go. He saw the two guns blaze back there in the rocks, and fired a shot at each one. A man cried out in agony, and the other stopped shooting. Mateo moved out, crouching low. Ed saw a man rear up and shoot, but Mateo's gun was an instant quicker. Then the vaquero was vanishing from Ed's sight.

Turning, Ed braced himself against a boulder—and waited.

THE T-Bar-S men stopped shooting, and finally there was a dead silence. Ed heard a dull groan come from Black Hernandez finally, and, when it stopped, his own labored breathing. There was some moving about among the attackers, then, and Matt Faber growled, "Watch it. It's likely to be a trick."

There was a long, long wait. Ed never knew how long.

Ed felt himself numbing with weakness, but then a boot scuffed noisily against a rock—close by. He lifted his sixgun, now enormously heavy in his fist, as Matt Faber appeared in the opening between two huge rocks. Faber saw him, swore bitterly, tried to back out. His spur caught somehow, tripped him, and he fell to his knees.

A voice shouted, "Drop your guns, T-Bar-S! This is Jeb Reese talking. Do as I say, dammit, or I'll let loose with this scattergun!"

Deputy Sheriff Reese's coming meant that Tracy Scott had forced him into acting, but it mattered little now to Ed Sargent. His gun was slow to respond to his will. He couldn't quite bring it to bear on Matt Faber—and Faber was not dropping his gun for Fat Jeb Reese.

Faber was still on his knees, but his gun was swinging up.

Ed saw the crazy-mad look on the man's ugly face, and put all he had into trying to raise his gun arm.

He got his weapon up, let the hammer fall. He saw only the flash of his gun and Faber's. He felt Faber's slug tear into him. . . . The boulder held him up. He was slumped against it when pudgy Jeb Reese came limping into the rocks followed by Mateo Gomez. He heard the deputy mutter, "Well, Faber's dead. Too bad. He's the one man I'd have liked to have seen hang!"

Reese eased Ed to the ground, dosed him with brandy from a bottle out of his coat pocket. He told Mateo to gather brush and start a fire; he needed light so that he could examine Ed's wound. It wasn't a serious injury. Torn flesh, broken ribs, a lot of spilled blood. Fat Jeb Reese removed his coat, dropped his suspenders, took off his white shirt. He folded the shirt carefully, lay it against the wound, secured it with the belt from Ed's jeans.

"Mateo, get on your horse," he said finally, "and fetch a wagon. Ed'll have to be hauled. He's in no shape now to sit in a saddle."

Mateo faded from Ed Sargent's fuzzy vision.

Ed hadn't lost consciousness, but he was dazed. Too, Fat Jeb Reese kept giving him brandy and it was befogging his brain. He was growing numb, almost pleasantly so. He felt too lazy to pay much attention to the talking Reese went through after Mateo had ridden off.

Reese said, "Tracy Scott sent me out here. I came along the road just in time to see some T-Bar-S riders turn into this stretch of rough country. I figured they must be after you, so I trailed them. But I'm not much good at that. Lost 'em, almost at once. Then I heard the shooting, and got here by following my ears. Faber's *compadres* scattered like coyotes when I started yelling."

Something was bothering Ed. It took his dazed mind a long moment to figure out what.

"Black Hernandez?" he said.

"He pulled out while I was looking at your wound," Reese said. "Mateo helped him mount up. I guess he wasn't hurt bad. He'll make it to Mexico, sure. He's like you, a tough hombre. How about another drink?"

By the time Mateo got back with a wagon and team, the brandy bottle was empty and Ed Sargent was dosed into a stupor. He remembered little of being loaded onto the wagon and hauled to the T-Bar-S, where Tracy Scott took charge of him. He was put to bed in the T-Bar-S ranchhouse, and Mateo rode all the way to Blaine for a doctor.

Tracy nursed him during the next few days, nursing him to the point of pampering him. Ed enjoyed that part of it, but he was not a man to lie flat on his back for long. Finally he said, "Tomorrow I'm getting up."

Tracy looked startled and tried to argue him out of it. But she gave in when realizing that his mind was made up. "Next thing you'll talk of leaving," she said ruefully.

"Any reason why I shouldn't?" he wanted to know.

"Well, with Matt dead, the T-Bar-S needs a new foreman," Tracy replied. "And with Matt's men having quit the Basin, almost a whole new crew will have to be hired. I'll need a man like you to boss the ranch, Ed. The pay is pretty good and. . . ."

Ed looked glum, shook his head. When he saw how disappointed Tracy looked, he said, "Now, if you needed a husband along with a foreman. . . ." He didn't need a reply to that.

The way Tracy Scott's face lighted up was reply enough.

Ed Sargent knew that he was at the T-Bar-S to stay. ★★★

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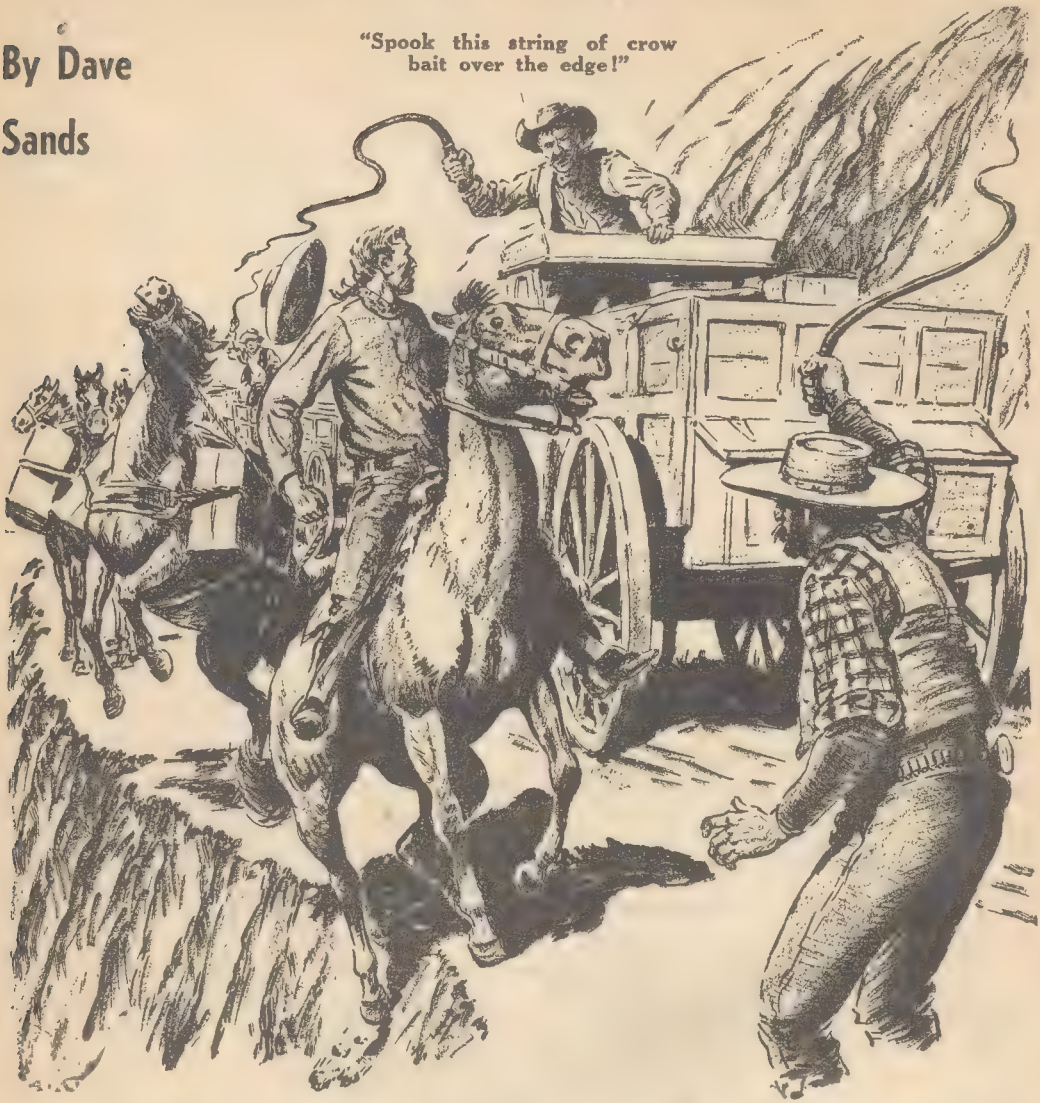
25c BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

It wasn't that young Wade Ingalls was slow-witted when he challenged the freighting monopoly of dangerous Digger Joplin . . . it just never had occurred to him to be afraid of anyone.

By Dave Sands


"Spook this string of crow bait over the edge!"

FLEA-BITE FREIGHT

IT WAS a sorry looking packstring that drifted into Lucky Gulch, that evening. The packer was a skinny young man with the cowhide boots and floppy hat of the settlers coming in on the lower desert, west of the Green Mountain mining country. He had twenty-three pack horses that he had scraped up somewhere, each cinched with a homemade pack saddle resting on a gunnysack pad.

The big Joplin wagon train happened to be in camp that evening, the highwheelers

that hogged the mountain trail to Higbee Landing, where the steamboats brought the camp's freight. Digger Joplin's freight yard was on the south edge of camp, and Digger let out a roar and barged out to the trail as the packer came by. He grabbed the bridle of the horse the packer rode and brought the animal to a rough stop.

The packed lifted a long leg over the horn of his saddle, dismounting in the awkward way of many of the nesters, who were used to riding bareback. His trousers were homespun, tight as they disappeared into his high, homemade boots. He reached out and dropped his hand on Digger's, and squeezed until Digger let loose of the bridle. Without a word, the young fellow started to mount again. His string was plodding on into camp.

"Wait a minute!" Digger gasped. "Where you going with them pack horses? Who are you, anyhow?"

"The name," the nester said, "is Ingalls. Wade Ingalls. I've got where I'm going right now, and what's it to you?"

"It's plenty!" Digger roared, getting back his confidence. "My wagons can handle all the hauling this camp's got! There ain't room even for them crowbaits of yours!"

"Where there ain't room, I make it," Wade said, and once more he prepared to mount.

Digger's hand dropped on Wade's shoulder and jerked him around. Digger's fist made a ball that bounced on the nester's chin. The freighter's tight red shirt split up the back as the big shoulders bunched and rolled. His rough, whiskery face held a scowl that was confidence spoiled by a brutal aggressiveness. The nester's gaunt body lifted off the ground. It hit the trail's tramped dust and lay inert. The saddled horse stretched its neck and sniffed at Wade, then it shot a hip and stood there. Digger Joplin strode back into his freight yard.

Wade Ingalls shoved up on his elbows finally. It dawned on him that he had reached Lucky Gulch, where he had planned to get some packing business. He had trouble recalling howcome one of the horses had kicked him in the face. Then he remembered the big wagon freighter with the red shirt. He remembered the homestead that had worn him to bone and gristle and the girl he wouldn't send for until he knew he could take care of her. The red-shirted freighter and the slim, yellow-haired girl were part of the same parcel, all at once. Wade got to his feet.

His saddlehorse was still here, but the packstring had disappeared ahead in the big mining camp, and right now was likely getting him into more trouble. Those horses, crow bait though they were, were precious to Wade Ingalls. They had cost him money he might well have invested in a safer way. But he was eager for the yellow-head, whose kisses were warm, whose heart was his. Wade took a look at the freight yard, then started toward it, allowing that the pack string could fend for itself a few minutes longer.

There was a slab fence around the freight yard. Half a dozen wagons were backed against the fence. There was a barn big enough to hold a troop of cavalry mounts. Wade saw at least a dozen men scattered about, all of them as rough-looking as Digger Joplin. Wade studied them, his head splitting, his jaw feeling like it had come unhinged. He didn't see any red shirt, nor was anybody paying much attention to him.

Then he saw what he wanted through the barn doorway, a daub of red in the murky interior. Wade tramped across the yard's thick dust. Teamsters were taking notice of him now, watching with sudden interest. Wade walked into the barn. Digger Joplin and another man were examining the hocks of a horse, both men bent over. They didn't look around. Wade planted a boot on Digger's thick posterior and gave a quick, hard kick.

"Friend," he said, "I like a warning before I'm hit."

Digger took two stumbling steps forward, went down on a shoulder and rolled over. The man he had been working with simply looked up and stared at Wade with an open mouth. Wade was no fool. He gave this fellow a bland look and started backing out the door. Digger had hired-help all over the lot, but they either hadn't seen or were too astonished to take it up. Then Digger let out a roar, shoving up. Wade swung and moved hastily until he was back on the trail. The way he saw it he had simply evened the score, and Digger had no complaint coming. Wade swung onto his horse and set it lumbering on into the mining camp.

AROUND the turn he got his first good look at the camp itself. All he saw was a long, rough street festooned by hitching racks. He noted a number of horses, but none of them wore packsaddles. Wade frowned and rode forward. There were no cross streets, and he rode a good two hundred yards before he came to the other end of the main stem. There he saw a corral, and his pack string was inside of it.

There was a man by the shut gate, chewing on a straw and staring at Wade as Wade rode up.

"Thanks for penning 'em up," Wade said. "I was held up."

The man spat out the straw. "So're they. Impounded. Untended stock on the main street. That's again' the law."

"Who're you?" Wade demanded.

"They pay me to take care of stray stock."

Wade swung down and walked over to the man. "What's it going to cost me?" he asked.

"Fifty cents a head."

"I ain't got it."

"Then you ain't got any packstring, either." The man was sympathetic but stubborn. "That's the law, bub. You'll have to raise the money or your horses will be sold for found."

Wade let it go for the time being. If they detained his horses they would have to feed the animals, charging plenty for it. But Wade had not only to get work now. He had to get an advance on that work with which to gain possession of his horses so he could do the work with them. He looked up and down the camp street, seeing the gaudy falsefronts of a boom mining camp, now beginning to simmer down a little. There were several stores and he saw the signs of at least three saloons, and they all were dependent on the steamboats and Higbee Landing for their supplies.

Wade tied his saddler to the hitchbar at the end of the street and set out to canvas the camp for business. He passed by the big places, whose hauling he had the sense to know he couldn't handle. But he counted three small stores, enough to keep him busy if he could get them interested, and whose business Digger Joplin wouldn't worry himself over. Wade wasn't looking for trouble. He would never have locked horns with Joplin if the man hadn't started it.

When he tried the first small store, Wade was all but thrown out of the place. A baldheaded man with a hooked nose heard what he wanted and scowled.

"Listen, boy," he said, lowering his voice though there was no one else in the place. "Even if you hauled free I wouldn't be interested. Not anymore. I encouraged competition to Digger Joplin once. Not only did the upstart go out of business his first trip, but Digger nearly ruined me, to boot. He simply refused to haul my freight in, claimin' I needed to learn to appreciate him. You're wasting time. You'll hear the same story all over this camp."

"Digger's got it all sewed up, has he?" Wade asked.

"With whang leather. Digger's getting rich, but we go along with him. We just pass his high freight charges on to the customers."

"They getting rich, too?" Wade demanded.

The man shook his head. "Not many, any more."

"Then why should Digger?" Wade asked.

"On account of he's got a freight monopoly," the man said tiredly. "Now get out of here. If you're fool enough to try to muscle in, I don't want it known I even talked to you."

Wade walked out with the skin between his eyebrows puckered tight. He didn't want to get rich but only to hasten the day when he could send for his girl. It had surprised him to learn that Joplin worried over the small businesses the same as the big. But hogs could be like that, knowing another small snout in the trough could grow to be a big one.

Wade tried the other two small stores and not until he came to the last did he get any encouragement. A woman ran that one, a fat woman with pleasant eyes and a kind mouth. She listeed to Wade's inquiry as to whether he might pack in her freight, displaying less reluctance than the others had shown.

The nice eyes twinkled a little when she said, "Son, the only one who'll ever muscle in on Digger Joplin is somebody who can muscle Digger out. Do that, and give us fair rates, and you'll find yourself in business for keeps."

"I need a starting place," Wade said shrewdly.

"So you do. Digger usually gets them on the first trip. Show me you can bring in one load, and you've got my business. Show the camp you can make two trips, and you'll get more business. And so on."

"What would I haul?" Wade asked.

"Anything," the woman said cheerfully. "It's making the first trip that's important."

Wade didn't know why he should feel encouraged by that, but he did. It was at least the promise of work, if he could show he could stick against Digger Joplin. Wade emerged onto the street, pondering the problem of getting his pack string out of the camp pound. The bill would be eleven-fifty, whereas his funds fell considerably short of that. He considered a try at gambling but shied away because he wasn't practiced at that.

There was one prospect, and that was Digger Joplin. The business canvass had taken Wade to the end of the street closest to the Joplin freight yard. He swung about and headed once more for the slab-fenced inclosure.

This time he created a stir when he walked through the gate. Now Digger was out in the yard with his men gathered about him, and possibly he was instructing them in what to do in case there was a new outbreak of competition. Digger looked as surprised as the others when he saw Wade traipse in.

Wade tramped up to Digger and said, "Joplin, I got six dollars that says I can put your finger in your mouth in a way that you can't walk three steps without taking it out again."

"Boy," Digger said, "what lunatic asylum did you get loose from?"

"If you don't have that kind of money," Wade said sympathetically, "we'll make it two bits."

Digger's eyes narrowed. "Make it ten dollars."

"Six," Wade insisted. That was all he had. "And put up stakes. That old fellow with the blacksmith apron looks honest to me."

Digger's scowl deepened but he reached into his pocket. Wade counted out his money and handed it to an oldster who had looked reasonably fair-minded to him. When Digger had put up his share, Wade said, "Lift your knee up close to your chest, Digger. Now bend the front of an elbow around the back of that knee. That's right. Now put your finger in your mouth."

Digger obeyed, standing there somewhat like an oversize crane, waiting for further instructions. He didn't get them. Wade walked over to the oldster and held out

his hand. The old man grinned and forked over. Digger caught on, then, and began to splutter. He took a hop, overbalanced, and, sure enough, his finger came out of his mouth just in time to save him from spilling flat. Then he walked more than three steps toward Wade.

"That's a trick!" he bawled. His big fists had clenched tight.

"Did what I claimed, didn't I?" Wade asked. Digger's men were having trouble with their faces. Digger saw that and swung and walked off toward the barn.

WADE camped on Gooseberry Creek, that night, a good third of the way out to Higbee Landing. He reached the river town in the middle of the next afternoon. It was his first visit there, and he found it fascinating. A steamboat was tied up at the wharf, riding the quiet river like a big lily pod. The dockshed was crammed with freight for Lucky Gulch, but Wade could claim none of it without authorization from the consignees.

Nontheless, he had to have a packload to deliver to the mining camp the following evening. The timing was of equel importance, for Wade had learned that Joplin's wagon train wouldn't be trailing again for yet another day. Wade hankered to make a quick trip out and back while the wagons were laying over for maintenance and repair.

Digger Joplin had a wagonyard here, also. It was on the river, just below the wharf structures and, with the wagons on the other end of the mountain haul, it looked deserted. Regarding the yard, Wade had a sudden wonder. Digger had bailed out his packstring for him. Why shouldn't the man also furnish his first packload? Wade drove his string into the wagonyard.

A man looked up from a wheel he was repairing and gave Wade a puzzled nod.

"Howdy," Wade said pleasantly. He looked at the freight-shed running along one side of the lot. There were all kinds of boxes, bags and barrels on the high loading platform, freight Joplin had been obliged to clean out of the crowded dockshed but which he hadn't yet found room for in his wagons. Wade regarded it hungrily. He drove the packstring over beside the platform and said, "Well, where do I start?"

"You working for Digger?" the man asked in surprise.

"This one trip. I'll take what I can handle and what's laid here the longest. Digger's getting crowded. He'll tell you all about it when he gets here with the wagons."

The yardman not only assented, he helped Wade sling on his packs. Wade didn't even take time to eat in Higbee Landing, nor to admire the steamboat further, but hit the trail at once.

The twenty-three horse packstring was close to the mountain divide, the next noon, when Wade grew aware of a wagon outfit on the grade ahead. He couldn't see it yet, but the jingling bells on the horses' hames were evidence enough. Wade pulled out of a tired slump, worried. Any wagon outfit would be Digger Joplin's, ahead of schedule, and this precipitous mountain trail was no place to encounter it.

In the first place the trail, at this point, was one lane wide, the rocky mountain walls rising straight above and falling straight below it. There was no turning about and running downgrade somewhere to hide, while Joplin passed, because Wade's lead horse wore a jingling set of bells itself as was imperative on the mountain trails. By now the wagoners probably knew that somebody was coming up the grade. There was a turnout just behind Wade, and he couldn't remember how far ahead it was to the next one.

Wade squared his jaw and rode on after his string, which hadn't stopped. Around the next turn he saw the lead wagon, looming high and big and dangerous at its loftier elevation. Wade bit his lip. He would have to take the outside, and it would be a tight squeeze getting twenty-three bulging pack-

horses past the crowding wagons without trouble. And, in that, Wade wasn't considering the fact of Digger Joplin's presence.

He saw the lead teamster straighten, twist his body and yell something to somebody behind. His wagon didn't pull over against the bank an inch. Wade swallowed. There was a good eighty foot drop below this point on the trail, with nothing to land on at the bottom but a bolder-strewn talus.

Acting as wagonmaster, Digger Joplin rode a horse. Now Digger edged carefully past the lead wagon and came on. Even at a distance Wade could detect the grin on Digger's face, and it wasn't the friendly camaraderie of the freight trails. Digger swung his horse across the trail, bringing the packstring to a halt. Wade rode on up to him.

"So you got a load," Digger said. "And I'll just see who had the gall to give you the business."

"Help yourself," Wade said. There wasn't much else he could say because the consignee's names were stenciled in big lamp-black letters on every piece of freight he carried.

Digger took his look, and his brow began to darken. "Prine's!" he breathed. "Hebo and Landers'! The biggest mercantiles in camp! You mean to tell me they gave you a piece of their business, Ingalls?"

Wade shrugged.

Digger swung his horse and rode back up the trail. A number of his teamsters had walked to the head of the train, and they knotted there, talking earnestly. Wade felt his knees shaking. It would be next to impossible to throw his string past the wagons. The wagons couldn't turn around or even back to the next turnout above. The string easily could be reversed and taken to the one below. He ought to do that and pray that the wagons would keep on rolling, leaving him alone. But it meant backing down to Joplin for the first time.

Suddenly Joplin motioned, waving Wade on up the trail. Then he cupped his hands to his mouth and bawled, "Come on, Ingalls! We ain't going to set here all day for you!"

After that Wade knew he couldn't backtrack. The wagons stood in the middle of the trail, with less than four feet of space between them and the outer edge of the high trail. Wade had a good lead pony, but he knew it wouldn't essay that stricture voluntarily. Wade rode up to the head of the string, caught the pony's halter rope and led it on.

THE horse followed, the others falling in behind from habit. There were six wagons which, with teams, strung out for a distance of nearly a hundred yards. Before Wade got the first pack horse past he knew that the hind animal had entered the narrow passageway. Then suddenly a teamster cracked a blacksnake whip, making a report like a rifle shot. The nervous packhorses turned every which way on the stricture, wanting nothing but to get out of it.

Wade yelled a protest, and at that moment a teamster stepped out from the space ahead of the hind wagon. He also carried a whip, and he blocked the trail. Digger Joplin had walked up between the bank and the wagons, and he cut across to Wade. Digger had a grin of mixed malevolence and satisfaction on his face.

"You had the brass to cut in on my choice business!" Digger breathed. "So it takes a big lesson in what's wise and what's foolish hereabouts!" Then he bawled, "Boys, cut loose and spook this string of crow bait over the edge!"

"No!" Wade breathed involuntarily. "Man, you don't mean that!"

"Don't I?" Digger asked.

The man above Wade drew back an arm and brought his long whip forward. Its popper straightened out with that baneful crack, taking Wade's hat off his head. Teamsters stood between the wagons all

along the line, their poppers lifting hair and hide from the terrified packhorses, crowding them out toward the trail's sharp edge.

Wade was helpless. But he looked at Digger with burning eyes, saying, "Cut it out, Digger. It ain't the horses' fault. What do you want?"

"How about your horses?" Digger asked. "They wouldn't make good glue, but I'll take 'em off your hands. But that freight's going over the cliff to show certain storekeepers it don't pay to get rambunctious."

"Go ahead, Digger," Wade said calmly. "I got it out of your freightyard."

Digger's voice raised an octave in pitch. "Outta *my* freightyard?"

"That's right. So how about letting me pass and take it on into camp?"

Digger's eyes rounded in horror, "Not any, bucko! That's all the worse! Boys, take these sorry-looking horses on up to the turnout and unload 'em. We'll drive 'em ahead of us till we can scatter 'em good and permanent. We'll pick up the freight on the way back, or I'll have it to pay for."

Digger walked off. Wade was helpless, unarmed, outnumbered and surrounded by men who wouldn't hesitate to use one of those deadly blacksnakes on him. Digger let him keep the saddle horse, perhaps hoping he would quit the country. But the packhorses were taken on up the trail. When they came back, not only their loads but the pack-saddles had been removed. Each horse was led down below the wagons, then, with its halter removed, was given a slap and sent running down the trail. An hour later the wagons moved on.

Digger stopped his horse by Wade's long enough to grin and say, "You took six bucks off of me. That's about what your string's worth. So I reckon we're quits, Ingalls." He laughed and rode on.

The freight wagons were beyond hearing before Wade stirred. The cash accrual from from two tough years of homesteading was wiped out. The yellow-haired girl was going to remain a tantalizing dream for another two years, another five, or maybe forever. Maybe he could succeed eventually in regathering his horses. Maybe there was law, somewhere, that he could go to for justice. But that would still leave him one more man Joplin had run off the trail.

Wade got his hat then rode up the grade to the turnout. Since he had learned he was responsible for the freight piled there against the bank, Joplin had stacked it carefully and covered it with a couple of wagon sheets. According to his schedule, Wade knew, the wagons would be back past here late the next day, and Joplin would leave room so he could pick it up. Dejection settled on Wade, and he figured he might as well light out for his land claim.

The thing that stayed crosswise in his craw was the highhanded manner in which Joplin was dictating to Lucky Gulch. It wasn't the merchants there whom Wade pitied. They were truckling to avoid trouble and were simply passing the costs on to their customers. The customers had no say in the matter other than to foot the bill. Thinking of them, Wade was damned if he would throw in his hand.

He felt better instantly and within moments had seen his next step. He needed a gun and a set of bells, and he didn't want to enter Lucky Gulch in disgrace to secure them. Again he thought of Digger Joplin.

He rode on to the pass at the top of the divide and found that he could leave the trail there and ride out along the ridge. Presently he dismounted, loosened the cinch on his horse and tethered the animal where it could graze. Then Wade stretched out under a pine tree, jaded and dog-tired and with work to do that night. He was asleep instantly.

It was dark when he awakened. A cool mountain breeze ran along the ridge, and a dazzle of starlight filled the sky. Wade rose instantly and within minutes was riding down the other side of the mountain toward Lucky Gulch.

The wagonyard was dark when he came

to it. Wade rode up on its rear, left his horse, and had no trouble getting through the slab fence. He doubted that there would be a watchman up and about, but it was very probable that somebody would be sleeping here to keep tab on things. Wade moved cautiously into the barn, figuring it would be easy to latch onto a set of hame bells. The gun worried him, but there was a chance that he could find one somewhere about.

It came easier than he had figured on. In the tackroom he found more bells than he could use. Unfortunately he knocked a set off the wall peg and they made a loud, jingling rattle on the floor. Wade scooped them up, discouraged now from continuing his search for a gun. He slid toward the big front door, slipped through it, and found himself facing a man who held a gun on him.

"Just a minute, there," the man said, then in the next breath added, "I'll be jiggered. It's the skinny galoot that took Digger so purty."

"You," Wade said, for it was the oldster who had held stakes for him and showed some signs of human decency. "Listen, Dad," he added, "if you liked that, I can show you a prettier one, if you'll help."

"How?"

"Loan me that gun."

"If you ain't a nervy cuss!" the old man breathed. "You aim to shoot Digger?"

"Not unless that's your price for the gun."

"What gun?" the oldster asked. "I ain't got any gun." And he didn't have when he turned and trudged off for he had dropped it into the dust.

It was a sixshooter and fully loaded, Wade found when he scooped it up. He slid it under the waistband of his pants and headed for the fence.

Wade was well rested but fairly caved in from hunger by late afternoon of the day that followed. At that hour he left his cheerless camp and rode down to the first turnout below the divide, where he found the big heap of freight unmolested. He carried the bells he had obtained, and once more he had the gun hidden in the waistband of his homespun pants. From the ridge, a little earlier, he had seen the Joplin wagons crawling back on their slow, loaded haul from Higbee Landing. Wade left his horse at the freight pile and walked on down to the bend just above the lower turnout. There he settled himself patiently for a long wait.

IT SEEMED to him that hours passed before he could detect the sound of approaching wagons, feeling them mainly in a faint, jarring rumble in the ground. Now he began to jiggle the hame bells rhythmically, trying to give them the cadence of a horse moving at a fairly rapid gait. He kept this up steadily, though he felt it wise presently to pull back a little to make certain that he was not seen.

Presently he could hear the grind of the wagons, the cursing of the drivers, the occasional crack of one of those savage whips. Wade kept right on jingling his bells, figuring that the wagons were pulling up close to the lower turnout. He hoped to stop them there and figured he could because they were tooling heavily upgrade, probably were not expecting trouble, and wouldn't care to risk jamming into some big rig coming down upon them.

Wade had his gun in his hand now but he kept on jiggling the bells. This went on for another five minutes, then another five. Then Wade heard a horse coming up the grade and knew it would be Joplin riding forward to see what traveled so steadily without making any headway. Abruptly Joplin's horse came around the outside turn in the trail.

Joplin flung a quick, startled stare at Wade, his attention riveted mainly on the gun that pointed at him.

"Come right on, Digger," Wade said. "And don't let out a sound." He waited

until Joplin's horse had come up to him, then reached out and took the man's gun from its holster. He felt better with one in each hand, while Digger patently felt worse in that situation.

"Why damn your hide!" Digger breathed, then he took Wade's advice and shut up.

Wade kept jingling the bell. Singly and sometimes two or three together, Joplin's teamsters walked up the grade to investigate the mystery. Joplin was the only one of them that packed a firearm. The others rounded that outside turn to find themselves staring at a tall, gaunt man with two guns, one trained on them and the other on a growing group of silently swearing men backed against the bank.

When he had all seven of the wagon crew, Wade said, "Now, Digger, you got twenty-four horses down there. One more than you took away from me. I set out to pack a load of freight to Lucky Gulch, and I aim to pack it. If any of your cayuses ain't broke to the packsaddle, that's just your hard luck. You're sure as the devil going to load 'em."

He forced the men back down the grade in a group. Sure enough, the freight wagons had been pulled over into the turnout. Wade took station out on the trail where he could watch the full length of the train while the teamsters unhooked, then unharnessed their horses save for the halters. Wade kept Digger Joplin before him, heard the man's steady mumble of curses, but got nothing but obedience from Digger and his men.

Presently Wade was herding the contingent back to the upper turnout, the horses first and the teamsters in a group behind. The horses were broken to the saddle, for many freighters rode one of the wheelers. The gunny pads and the packsaddles went on, and enough of the freighters knew how to tie a pack to finish the job.

Wade swung onto Joplin's horse, leading his own. Then, with a crew of seven assistant packers, he started on for Lucky Gulch.

The pack string drew notice as it entered Lucky Gulch in the tail of the afternoon. In the first place the horses wore Joplin's brand. In the second Joplin's entire crew was assisting, however reluctantly, being somewhat sensitive about its heels. Wade used the main thoroughfare and halted half down the street. He was in front of Prine's mercantile, the biggest store in town.

"Most of the stuff goes here, boys," Wade told his involuntary packers.

A crowd began to gather. Prine emerged from his store looking astonished. Wade saw the fat woman who had encouraged him. She was the one who started laughing. But it caught and went like wildfire through the crowd that watched Digger and his teamsters toil. Wade held them to it, then made them remove his wooden saddles and stack them on Prine's long porch. Then he told Digger to take his horses and go wherever he pleased, but that it would be a good idea to round up the scattered horses that belonged to Wade Ingalls.

The fat woman came up to Wade then and put a hand on his arm. "Son, you did it," she said heartily. "But you ain't going to be able to handle the business with that sorry little pack string."

"I just want to do a little packing, ma'am," Wade told her. "I got a notion Digger won't be so highhanded, now. He'll give you decent freight rates. All I want is two-three months work. If you and the other little stores'll give me that, I'm fixed."

"Just want a stake, huh?" the woman asked.

Wade grinned and blushed. "Got a girl back East, ma'am. Want to fetch her out when I'm sure I can take care of her."

The woman stared at him. "You had doubts as to that? Son, you come with me. I've got just what you need."

"If you mean food, ma'am, I'm obliged."

"Food, too," the woman said, smiling at Wade. "But what I had in mind was paper, pen and ink. That's all *you* need to send for your girl."

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VINEGAR JOE'S HAIR-RAISIN'!

By Roger Dee

"May I pass, please?" Carrie sniffs.

Folks said the wedding would be Two Rock's biggest blowout, but they didn't know that Uncle Jasper and his Injun pard, Vinegar Joe Talking Elk, were fixing to light the fuse!

I WOULDN'T known about the course of true love never running smooth, but I learned one thing before I got out of knee pants—never horn into a romance that *is* prospering unless you have got a fast horse staked out, because it is riskier than tangling with a Texas twister.

For instance, there wasn't a happier couple in Kinney County, New Mexico, than John Robert Weldon and Carrie Ellis until family pride—in the flabby shape of Senator Houston Cusher—raised its head. After that it was war to the hilt, the strategy being handled by the Senator and by John Robert's Uncle Jasper, who was the wickedest old hellion that ever outrun a posse.

John Robert's courtship didn't start off so peaceable, at that. John Robert was a big, easy-going youngster, a first-class veterinarian and a total stranger to trouble. But the first time Carrie Ellis saw him he had just caught Chad Berry giving the boot to Dollie Davis' pet poodle dog Fluffy in front of the Queen High Saloon and Dancehall where Dollie worked, and John Robert was tearing up the sod in chunks.

Carrie comes tripping down the boardwalk toward her Uncle Calvin's law office just as the fight ends, holding a dime-sized parasol over her honey-colored hair and turning her big blue eyes about curious to see what-all has changed in Two Rock town during the two years she has been away at school in the East.

She spots Dollie Davis right off at the top of the Queen high steps, and is so busy adding her up that she nearly steps on John Robert and Chad Berry before she sees them. She catches herself just in time to see John Robert bang Chad's skull against the ground end of a hitching post until Chad loses interest complete.

John Robert staggers up out of the dust, shaking his head, and Dollie Davis deals him a warm smile. Dollie is a good-looking wench in a sort of dumb, plush-upholstered sort of way, and is very pleased to have been the cause of two gents cracking each other's heads.

"That was right noble of you, John Robert," says Dollie. "Come around to see me some time and I'll thank you proper!"

John Robert shies off, blushing like an Arizona sunset, and freezes in his tracks when he sees Carrie. John Robert has never been halter-broke around women, and just then his feelings show in his eyes like they are wrote on a blackboard.

"May I pass, please?" Carrie sniffs, not blind to this sudden admiration but too ladylike to show it.

John Robert turns redder and backs into the Queen High hitching rack—which is bad judgment, since a wall-eyed Circle H bronc promptly takes a wicked bite at the seat of his pants. John Robert is trying to find his tongue to apologize, but instead he hollers out a round-up word at the top of his lungs.

"Ruffian!" squeals Carrie, and flees down the boardwalk.

John Robert rattles his hocks the other way, so mortified he does not see Luther Finch until Luther steps out of his pa's dry-goods store and hangs a haymaker on John Robert's jaw which knocks him kicking.

"I'll teach you to insult a lady!" roars Luther. "I am planning on keeping company with Miss Ellis, you lowdown cow-doctor, and I will not have her annoyed by the likes of you!"

Luther is a big six-footer in his early twenties, two hundred pounds heavy, with curly black hair and a twenty-four carat opinion of hisself. He is jumping the gun a little about keeping company with Carrie, but he has been introduced to her already and that is leeway enough for Luther.

Carrie looks back, of course, just in time to see John Robert get up and deal Luther a clout which puts an accordion pleat in his nose and spreads him out on the boardwalk as flat as an old gunnysack. She comes running back, thinking Luther is fatally injured, and gives John Robert a look that tears the heart right out of him.

John Robert ducks into his Uncle Jasper's saddle shop down the street, downhearted and looking for consolation. "She is the prettiest thing that ever wore shoes, Uncle Jas," he finishes, "and I have plumb

disgusted her for life. What will I do?"

Old Jasper spits out a mouthful of tacks and grunts like an exasperated shoat. Jasper is a pint-sized, leather-faced old heller who should have died two generations ago of his own cussedness, but he is all the kin John Robert has to turn to.

"Don't come in here and cry on my saddle-leather," he snarls. "You'll shrink it. Go hang yourself, you moon-eyed fool—you'll be better off!"

Which is the only consolation John Robert gets till the night of the big dance, when half of Kinney County meets at the Two Rock school house to kick up its social heels.

NOW, Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Ellis do not care particular for this crude form of entertainment, but it happens that Calvin is a lawyer and needs all the trade he can drum up. So they show up at the dance and bring Carrie, who is their niece and ward.

John Robert is there early, nervous as a tinhorn in church, all slicked out in a pearl-buttoned shirt and a yeller neckerchief that would have blinded a bald eagle. His rope-colored hair is brushed into a neat cowlick, and he makes a very touching picture when he looks at Carrie with his heart in his eyes.

The fiddles start the dance with Buffalo Gal, and it is not any of your fancy hug-me-tight jigging, either. It is cowcountry style: *"Up and down, gents on the outside, change your partners!"*

It is not five minutes till John Robert is stepping with Carrie, and he nearly faints away when she gives him a warm smile.

"I know now why you fought that awful Berry Person," she says. "And I think it was noble of you. I'm sorry I misjudged you."

Things go very smooth after that, which is not surprising when you consider that John Robert is a likely-looking lad and is prime husband material. Carrie ignores Luther Finch and starts going with John Robert instead, and when her Aunt Sophy raises hob Carrie shows that she has a mind of her own.

"If I can't see John Robert," Carrie says, "then I'll go over to Dutchman's Flats and get a job teaching school."

Miz Sophy gives in at that, but she is still as sore as a saddle-galled bronc and never misses a chance to low-rate John Robert. Carrie and John Robert do not mind, however, and it begins to look like the Reverend Wilbur Falk will soon be ringing his church bell over them.

Then Senator Houston Cusher, who is Miz Sophy's brother, honors Two Rock with a visit. He shoves his oversized beak into John Robert's courtship, and the fur flies immediate.

The Senator is a duck-legged little runt with a head as bald as a buzzard's egg and a watermelon stomach bulging out his claw-hammer coat. He is somewhat proud of the stomach, but is touchier about his slick scalp than an Irishman is about County Cork. He has watery little eyes the color of skim milk and a horse-tail mustache, and a cucumber nose laced with little red veins like the threads in a new dollar bill.

This last is a drunkard's nose for certain, except the Senator is only an ex-drunkard, having his whiskey beak left over as a souvenir of the old days. Nobody in Two Rock can remember it except Jasper Weldon and old Vinegar Joe Talking Elk, but the Senator was once the wildest tosspot west of the Pecos, being one of the kind that can not touch the stuff without ripping up the scenery and winding up stiff in the gutter. He has conquered his weakness for drink, however, by staying strictly away from it, and is now one of the state's biggest politicos.

The Senator alights from the 9:37 A.M. train from Albuquerque and struts across Two Rock to the Ellis home, where Miz Sophy clacks over him like a distracted hen. He takes over immediate, and when

he learns that his niece is going steady with a veterinarian he blows up like a keg of homebrew.

"The disgrace of it!" he bellers, swelling up like a poisoned gopher. "A niece of mine consortin' with a cow-doctor! My old grandfather would wheel over in his grave at Lexington, Kentucky, if he knowed—Sophy, it has got to be stopped!"

Miz Sophy is plenty willing. The first thing they do is to round up Luther Finch and Chad Berry, and between them they cook up a plot which would have done credit to an Indian agent.

JOHN ROBERT has just returned from doctoring a sick colt at the Circle H and is washing up in the room he shares with his Uncle Jasper behind the saddle shop, when Chad Berry comes in. Chad is wearing his Stetson on one side of his head, still having a lump on the other, but he is quite friendly.

"I have just come from apologizin' to Dollie Davis," he says, "and she is all tore up about her dog Fluffy, which she thinks has ate rat poison by mistake. She wants to know if you will run by and take a look at him, John Robert."

So John Robert, being a natural gentleman, grabs his hat and goes down to the Queen High Dancehall where Dollie has a room. He finds Dollie brewing tea over a coal-oil burner, but Fluffy the poodle is nowhere in sight.

"I'll fetch him," Dollie says. "Sit down and have a cup of tea while I'm out, John Robert."

John Robert sits, balancing his teacup on his knee and waiting for Fluffy. Dolly does not bring in the mutt, however—she breezes in alone, wearing a flimsy sort of kimona thing that spooks John Robert like a startled elk.

He bolts for the door immediate, but he is too late. Senator Cusher's scheme is working as smooth as goose-grease.

When he yanks open the door John Robert finds himself face to face with Carrie, who is coming up the steps with her Aunt Sophy on one side and the Senator on the other. Carrie is very white, and her eyes are shiny with tears.

"They told me you came here when you weren't seeing me," she said. "But I couldn't believe it until I saw for myself."

John Robert looks like he has been shot at and missed. "I am here to doctor Dollie's dog Fluffy, who is sick," he swears. "Honest, Carrie, I—"

At this point Fluffy the poodle springs out, barking very brisk. Dollie follows with John Robert's Stetson.

"Don't forget your hat, honey," she coos. "If you *must* go."

Miz Sophy takes Carrie's arm and glares at John Robert. "Do not ever set foot in my house again," she orders.

The Senator *harumphs* and bristles his horse-tail mustache.

"And do not speak to my niece again on peril of your life," he bellers. "Were I twenty years younger, sir...."

And when they leave he adds, "I might of knowed that no kin of Jasper Weldon's could be other than a scurvy tinhorn!"

They march off, Carrie walking very straight and trying to hide her tears. At home she bursts down complete and admits to her Aunt Sophy that she has made a horrible mistake.

"Nothing matters now," she says. "I'll marry Luther Finch whenever you say."

"Day after tomorrow, then," says Miz Sophy, quick as a wink. "At ten A.M."

John Robert takes his Stetson and dusts down to the saddle shop and Uncle Jasper. Uncle Jasper figures first off that John Robert is lucky to escape the perils of matrimony, but Senator Houston Cusher's parting shot is a different matter.

"That thievin' old tosspot!" Jasper hollers. "I'll teach him to humilerate my relations in public! You go to bed, boy, and let me handle this!"

John Robert turns in, wishing fervent to

die, while old Jasper sits up and lubricates his thinking machinery with a bottle of rock-and-rye.

At two in the morning John Robert is woke up by his Uncle Jasper's howling, which sounds like a Hopi buck at a snake dance. He springs out of bed and finds old Jasper on the floor with tears streaming down his wrinkled face like beer wrung out of a bar towel.

John Robert has got him to bed before he learns what is up—Uncle Jasper has figured out his revenge, and is laughing in advance at what is going to happen to Senator Cusher and Miz Sophy Ellis. The trouble is that he can not tell John Robert about it, since every time he starts he goes into another convolution.

Matter of fact, if it is not for the rock-and-rye bottle being empty, John Robert would swear his uncle was plumb hysterical.

John Robert rises the next morning feeling very low and goes down to the Two Rock Tamale Tavern for breakfast, leaving his Uncle Jasper grinning in his sleep like a degenerate old possum. But John Robert's peace of mind is shot to ribbons, and he can not eat a bite.

Worse, his buddies drop in to sympathize, which is bad medicine for a man already hip-deep in misery. The longer he thinks about it the more desperate John Robert gets, till finally he claps on his Stetson and tramps off to Carrie's house—figuring, of course, that an innocent party can not be convicted without a hearing, and that Carrie will believe him now after the shock has wore off.

It does not happen that way.

Carrie slams the door in his face so hard his ears ring, which peexes John Robert so that he gives the doorknob a yank that pulls it out by the roots and pitches him headfirst off the porch into Miz Sophy's petunia bed.

He rises to discover that he is outnumbered three to one.

Senator Cusher busts out of the house with a brass fire-poker, *harumphing* with joy because John Robert has played right into his hands. Luther Finch charges over from his pa's store, with Chad Berry at his heels.

They jump John Robert before he can get unstuck from the petunia bed and bulldog him down till the Senator can get in a lick with the poker which lays John Robert out like a side of beef. They then lug him out of the yard and toss him into the street.

Carrie cries considerable, but her Aunt Sophy will not let her go and see if John Robert's skull is cracked. And finally he wobbles to his feet and staggers off, hoping he will drop dead before he is out of Carrie's sight.

He finds his Uncle Jasper gone, leaving a note which says:

> Gone to Albuquerque, will be back this evening. Lay low and keep out of trouble.

John Robert circulates around town, but all he can learn is that his Uncle Jasper had six eggs and a water glass of tequila for breakfast, and was seen walking to Vinegar Joe Talking Elk just before heading out for Albuquerque.

Vinegar Joe Talking Elk is a shriveled-up Jicarilla Indian runt who owns a souvenir shop at the edge of Two Rock, and has two claims to fame—he is ten days older than original sin, and is the only hombre in Kinney County who can hold a candle to Jasper Weldon when it comes to orneriness.

John Robert is lying in his bunk that night and wondering if Carrie would be upset any if he commits suicide, when his Uncle Jasper comes in with a bundle under each arm and a wicked look in his eye.

He opens one bundle and takes out a black suit of clothes. The other gives up a tin bug-sprayer, the kind of pump-handled squirt-gun that shoots a cloud of die-fly. With it is a gurgling bottle which John Robert knows can not be whiskey, or his

Uncle Jasper would have drunk it already.

"There will be hootin' and hollerin' in the streets of Two Rock tomorrow," prophesies Jasper, grinning so wide his nose and chin rasp together like sandpaper. "There will be hell to pay and no pitch hot, or I miss my guess."

"I will not be makin' merry," John Robert groans. "Because tomorrow at ten Carrie is marryin' Luther Finch."

His Uncle Jasper chuckles like an axfiend sizing up his mother-in-law. "This'll stop it," he says. "And if it don't it won't matter a dang, because there won't be nobody left to tell about it!"

OLD Vinegar Joe Talking Elk has owed Jasper Weldon a favor which dates back near the floating of the Ark, and Vinegar Joe is a man of principle when returning a favor means a kick in the levis for somebody else.

While Uncle Jasper is in Albuquerque, Vinegar Joe stalks down to the Two Rock Barber Shop to watch Senator Houston Cusher getting his morning shave. The Senator also has a liberal dose of hair-grower, in hopes of making his head look less like a pool ball, and is fretting very earnest about this naked knob of his when he struts outside and finds Vinegar Joe blocking his path.

"You want medicine to make hair grow?" grunts Vinegar Joe, who knows his advertising. "I fix it, or double money back."

First off the Senator is minded to clout this Jicarilla runt across the skull with his cane, but a sleeping wickedness in Vinegar Joe's eye stops him.

"What do you know about growin' hair?" he demands.

"*Hargh*," snarls Vinegar Joe Talking Elk. "You ever see bald Indian?"

The Senator has not, and it sets him to thinking. He has visions of strutting around Santa Fe state house, *harumphing* and patting his flowing mane, and he swallows the bait at a gulp.

"Tonight is full moon," says Vinegar Joe. "You come at midnight, when sign is right. Bring five dollar, all silver."

"Why not now?" asks the Senator.

"You want hair?" Vinegar Joe demands. "You come at midnight!"

It does not smell just right, but the Senator would rather have a solid head of hair than a free ticket to the Hereafter. So at midnight he knocks at Vinegar Joe's door, and finds Joe waiting for him with a brown quart bottle.

"Five dollar," says Joe, and gives up the bottle.

The Senator is now ready to go, but Vinegar Joe has other ideas. He is rigged out in Jicarilla ceremonial paint and G-string, and looks like nothing alive or dead. His old hide is wrinkled like an alligator's back and his ribs stick out like a washboard, but he is as limber as a rattler and twice as wicked.

"You drink medicine here," he orders, "while I do Jicarilla spirit dance."

"Drink it?" hollers the Senator, sniffing the bottle. "I thought it was to be rubbed on!"

Vinegar Joe Talking Elk would make a lot better senator than Houston Cusher, and can prove it. "Hair grows from inside out," he grunts. "Not from outside in. You want hair, or not?"

So the Senator squats on a blanket and takes a swig from the brown bottle. It goes down surprising smooth, considering it is a mixture of straight grain alcohol and horse liniment, with a dash each of lemon extract and sheep-dip throwed in for flavor.

Vinegar Joe thumps a tomtom and starts chanting, shuffling in a circle around the Senator, who follows him with his eyes until he gets dizzy and takes another slug of miracle hair-grower to clear his vision. It is powerful stuff, especially for a man who has not tasted alcohol for thirty years but who still has an extosspot's weakness for it.

Vinegar has not worked up a sweat before the Senator passes out cold, *harumphing* and hiccuping. The minute he is snoring, the door opens and in come John Robert Weldon and his Uncle Jasper.

"Now that there," says Uncle Jasper, "is a tonic what *is* a tonic! It's too bad you're honest, Joe—you could make a fortune with a medicine show."

They strip off the Senator's clothes, and Uncle Jasper goes to work on him with the bug-spray. It is not loaded with die-fly, but with green stain which Uncle Jasper applies in a nice smooth coat from Senator Cusher's toenails to his arid skull, taking special pains with the horse-tail mustache.

"*Omigawd*," breathes Uncle Jasper while they watch the Senator dry off. "He looks like a cross between a green fly and a dead alligator!"

Old Vinegar Joe Talking Elk has not had so much fun since he scalped the first mayor of Two Rock back in 1884.

"How you expect him to look?" he snarls. "Like white rat?"

THERE is a great scurrying at the Ellis place next morning when the Senator does not show up, especial since he is supposed to give the bride away. Miz Sophy is near frantic.

Down at the saddle shop, John Robert's conscience is giving him a hard time. "If this works it may break Carrie's heart, Uncle Jas," he says. "And I love that girl somethin' painful. I—"

Old Jasper turns on him like a scalded bobcat.

"If you spoil this play," he snarls, "I personal will pound a hole in your head and pour in some brains. You're goin' to see it through!"

He leaves for Vinegar Joe Talking Elk's shack then, arriving early to get the Senator roused and primed. John Robert mopes around town, hoping for a last look at Carrie, but when the time comes he plays his part, not having any other choice.

Miz Sophy works fast, even without the Senator. Carrie is ready to go at nine, and the Reverend Wilbur Falk has got the girl organist playing the introduction at the Two Rock Church.

At nine-thirty the church is packed with slicked-up Two Rock citizens. Only John Robert and his Uncle Jasper are missing—and the Senator.

The organ is playing soft and pretty when Carrie comes down the boardwalk with her uncle and aunt. Luther Finch comes up from the other direction with Chad Berry, his best man, both wearing black suits and boiled collars. They meet at the church steps, and the organ strikes up the wedding march.

Down at Vinegar Joe's shack Uncle Jasper is beginning to worry that the 9:37 from Albuquerque may be late, which is the only circumstance that can stop his campaign now. He is as jumpy as a cat on a hot brick until he hears the engine tooting at Two Rock station.

On the schoolhouse steps Miz Sophy stops to shoot a smug look around, making sure everybody is impressed by this social triumph of hers. Luther Finch is grinning, but Carrie keeps looking anxious over the crowd for a glimpse of John Robert.

This is when lightning strikes first.

Across the street lopes an old duffer in a ragged straw hat and bib overalls with one gallus missing, packing a stone jug under one arm and spitting tobacco juice reckless through a ratty-looking beard.

After him comes a stringy woman in a feed-sack dress and no shoes, lugging a squalling baby on one hip and flashing everybody a gap-toothed grin that would of spooked a mountain lion. Around her prances a herd of barefoot kids, hollering and pointing.

"Thar you air!" yells the gent with the jug. "Hold up the weddin', Sister Sophy, till your brother's fambly kin hunker down in the seats o' honor!"

Miz Sophy near faints. "You're no

brother of mine!" she hollers back. "My family was one of the finest in Lexington, and—"

"Lexington, hell," hoots the gent with the jug. "We just arrove from Hogwaller Junction, whar you was raised! Whar's old Houston? We ain't seen him since he was run out of Cotton County for stealin' shoats!"

The crowd stares and snickers, and Miz Sophy near busts a seam. But she turns her back on these alleged relations of hers and staggers into the church, waving for the music to start again.

Luther Finch is waiting at the altar, looking nervous and uneasy. Carrie comes up the aisle on her Uncle Calvin's arm, and the Reverend Wilbur Falk opens his Bible to tie the knot.

This is when the second bolt hits. From the street outside comes a sort of horrible gurgling beller, punctured by the booming of a pair of hand guns.

The wedding march dies as folks rush to the windows to see what is going on—and what they see would of scared the G-string off an apache brave.

UP THE boardwalk staggers Senator Houston Cusher, bareheaded and barefoot, dressed in a pair of levis cut off short above his kneecaps. He is as green as a gourd and is roaring drunk.

One bloodshot eye squints up and the other squints down, and in each hand he waves a six-shooter—loaded with blanks before Uncle Jasper gives him his last swig of hair-grower and shoves him out of Vinegar Joe Talking Elk's shack—with which he is taking potshots at the sky.

"I see you gangin' up at the polls, you vote-stealin' polecats!" the Senator bellers, firing off both guns at the crowd under the impression that he is at an election which is going against him.

It could not be worse if a volcano has erupted. Miz Sophy Ellis squeals once and, for the first time in her life, passes out cold.

The Senator staggers up the steps and fires off his last two rounds at the Reverend Falk, who faints dead away with the idea that he is being slew without mercy.

Three or four husky citizens bulldog the Senator onto a bench, where he goes to sleep instant. Order is restored, and Miz Sophy rises up out of her faint.

"Start the music," she orders in a shaky voice. "Carrie, are you ready?"

The music starts again, wobbling some on account of the girl organist has got a mild case of hysterics.

This is when they discover that the Reverend Wilbur Falk is no longer in their midst.

Matter of fact, Uncle Jasper and old Vinegar Joe Talking Elk have snuck up while the Senator is being pacified and have packed the unconscious parson off the premises. It is a part of Jasper's scheme from the first to kidnap the preacher, and finding him laid out cold with powder burns on his shirt is a stroke of luck.

There is another hubbub, during which Miz Sophy sinks into a chair and chews her knuckles with a vacant look in her eye. Luther Finch runs a finger inside his boiled collar and squirms like an eel.

"Maybe we ought to postpone the weddin'," he suggests, being plainly eager to escape before something unexpected hap-

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Max Brand's Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: New Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me, this 19th day of September, 1951. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal) —Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

pens, such as finding hisself shot in the brisket without notice.

This rouses Miz Sophy, however, and makes it plain to all that she has more nerve than brains.

"We will have to find the Reverend Falk at once," she says. "Or a substitute."

"A travelin' parson registered at the hotel this a.m.," hollers out Herb Willis, who clerks at the Two Rock hotel. "You want I should fetch him, Miz Sophy?"

Miz Sophy does, and he goes out at a lope. He is back a few minutes later with this traveling minister, who is the unlikeliest looking parson that ever wore black.

He is maybe six-foot-two, with a flowing mane of white hair and a Buffalo Bill beard.

Herb Willis introduces him as the Reverend Tobias Tatum, and he takes over immediate.

"Step forward, children," he booms in a deep bass voice, "and be joined forever in the bands of matrimony!"

Luther Finch takes Carrie's hand, getting ready to shove the ring on quick.

"Do you, Luther Finch, take this girl to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Luther's answer is drowned out by Dollie Davis, who springs up at the back of the room and hollers for attention.

"Stop the weddin'!" yells Dollie, drawing all eyes her way.

"I can not let this happen," she says, very dramatic, "because I am part responsible for it. Folks, I was paid by Senator Houston Cusher and Miz Sophy Ellis to frame John Robert into visitin' my room the other evenin', and it ruint his chances with Miss Carrie. I done it for money, but my conscience gnawed me till I had to confess!"

She leaves out the part, of course, where Uncle Jasper visits her and swears he will burn down the Queen High Dancehall some night—with Dollie in it—unless she confesses.

The Reverend Tatum quiets the racket by raising a big brown hand.

"Luther Finch," he demands, "did you plan to marry this innocent girl on the rebound of a lovers' quarrel, after helpin' to hatch up the foul plot that has ruined her happiness?"

It is plain to Luther, looking around at the cold-eyed audience, that he can wind up as high man at a necktie party. He nods, afraid to trust his voice.

"Then," thunders the Reverend Tatum, ripping off his wig and whiskers, "I hereby pronounce you a lowdown, girl-stealin' coyote!"

The Reverend Tatum is of course none other than John Robert Weldon in disguise. He yanks a gun out from under his coat and draws a bead on Luther Finch, who busts out of the room bellering like a branded calf.

This is the final act of Uncle Jasper's little drama, and it brings to a close the troubles which have arose from the efforts of Senator Houston Cusher to break up his niece's romance.

Uncle Jasper returns the Reverend Falk, pacifying him at great cost by promising to attend church for the next three Sundays. He also pays off the family of nesters he has hired to impersonate Miz Sophy's kinfolks, and everybody is pleased but Miz Sophy.

Even the Senator is happy for the time being, since some kind soul has told him he has just won another tough election. John Robert and Carrie get married on the spot, swearing they will name their first one Jasper Joseph—in honor of Uncle Jasper and Vinegar Joe Talking Elk—even if it turns out to be a girl.

This happy ending is very pleasant for all, but it also leaves mighty little room to argue against my advice about never horning into a smooth-running romance unless you have got a fast horse staked out handy.

It's risky business, partner. If you don't think so, drop by the Santa Fe state house some time and ask Senator Houston Cusher! ★ ★ ★

TRIGGERS AT TOMAHAWK

By Ben T. Young

She'd found her gun, and had it pointed at him.

There was a lot of fighting going on about the Tomahawk spread, but loan-collector Waldron figured it was none of his business—until he learned they were fighting for the honor of stringing him up!

ALL at once and nothing first, things happened to Waldron. Shouts, gunfire, bullets. His startled dun pitched him off, and his Colt flew from its holster. *Hold-up!* he thought, grabbing the gun and rolling behind a rock.

The spatter of rifle-fire had come from rearward, and a cautious look-see through

the sage showed him two ground-tied ponies up the draw. Nearer, but still out of effective sixgun range, was the upthrust edge of a sandstone slab; and as Waldron watched, a red eye winked beside it and lead spanged against his rock.

That was good shooting, too good. He'd have no chance making a run for his dun which, now calm as a puddle, was grazing just a whoop and a holler yonder. He'd have to stay and fight, and he couldn't fight at that range. *They'll get to thinking I'm dead and come closer,* he reasoned, lying quiet.

Then his dun nickered, and a deadly voice drawled, "Leave that gun lay, mister, and get up."

Waldron's scalp prickled, his already-pounding heart went into a high lope. Las Guasimas and El Caney down in Cuba had been bad, but even with mauser bullets coming thicker than cloves on a Christmas hame he somehow hadn't been as scared as now.

Slowly—lest a too-quick move fetch a slug in the back—he took his hand away from the Colt, got to his knees, then his feet, and turned.

The old coot on horseback sat with Winchester ready. His brown face was hard, but at that he hadn't the earmarks of a road agent or on-the-dodge hombre from that Hole-in-the-Wall hide-out down south of the Big Horns. "C'mere," he ordered.

Then, like timberwolves rushing, the two riders from up the draw arrived. They looked like tough customers. Leaping from his roan, the little squint-eyed one unlatched the catchrope from his saddle, grabbed the dally end and began shaping a hangman's noose.

"None o' that, Cantrell," the old jigger ordered. "And damn you—and you, too, Kitchel—for shootin' at a man's back with no warnin'. He'll get a fair trial."

The tall lanky outfit called Kitchel had brought up Waldron's pony and gun. "Don't leave the law git in the way o' justice, boss," he protested. "He's a killer."

"Who'm I supposed to have killed?" Waldron demanded.

"Joe Givens," Cantrell said through his teeth.

Waldron's recently-eaten lunch began to churn in his stomach. His knees, bruised by his header off the dun, were shaking like pups in a sleetstorm. The money Givens had kept cached under the stone hearth in his cabin was now in Waldron's saddlebags on the dun.

"It's plain as paint he done it, boss," Kitchel persisted. "His eyes show it. Bones, here, says he seen a rider on a buckskin up that-a-way yesterday; and the tracks around Givens' shack showed a pony what toes in with his nigh hind foot like this'n here. I don't see no use botherin'—"

"But I do," his boss snapped. "And gimme his gun. You, Cantrell, put up that dam' line."

"I don't take orders from you no more, Sutcliff," Cantrell snarled. "If you ain't got the guts to hang this—"

Cantrell swallowed the rest along with his eating tobacco, for Sutcliff had spurred his bay against the little buzzard and knocked him sprawling. "You're still takin' orders from me when you're on Tomahawk land," Sutcliff growled. "Now get aboard and behave. You, too, mister," he added to Waldron.

ALL mounted, they headed back up the draw. Because Sutcliff mistrusted Cantrell and said so, he made the about-to-explode sidewinder ride ahead. Obviously sore at his boss, Kitchel chose to side Cantrell, leaving the Tomahawk owner and his prisoner to follow.

The lean, tough-minded ranchman seemed to be up and down as a cow's tail, but Waldron didn't know for sure. He'd feel a lot safer in the custody of a sheriff, but they were headed away from the nearest jail. "Where to?" he asked, brushing the dirt from his coat and pants.

"My house. Couldn't make Gillette before nightfall, and you wouldn't be safe travelin' after dark. That Cantrell's a rabid coyote—and there are others in these parts I don't trust, either. How much money you got in those saddle-bags?"

"Around seven hundred dollars. I want to get word to my boss soon as possible."

Sutcliff turned a skeptical eye. "Your boss?"

Waldron nodded. "Aubrey Trazlor over at Sundance. He runs the Black Hills Land and Mortgage Company and I ride for him, sizin' up layouts for folks who want loans, and collectin' interest money. I was headed for Lew Herzig's homestead down on Rawhide Creek. Yesterday afternoon I was at Givens'. He's been doin' well and surprised me by payin' off his principal. Leavin' there, I lined out for Duncan's road-ranch at Spotted Horse where I spent the night. This sunup I started. Had a snack to eat at noon."

Sutcliff tossed away his burned-out cigar. "You still could have killed Givens. When Cantrell found him this mornin' he was cold and stiff as an icicle. Been dead for hours. Don't help you any to admit bein' tied in with Trazlor, either. He's crooked as a snake in a cactus-patch."

"I wouldn't know about that," Waldron said. "Been with him only six weeks. Got the job through a friend in Cheyenne. I'd been laid up—" Briefly, he told of being in the post hospital at Fort D. A. Russel, recovering from a thigh wound received while with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders at El Caney. When discharged, his old Window-Sash outfit down near Chugwater would have taken him back, but the Army doctors had advised laying off cowpunching for a while, till his leg was wholly sound again.

"Rode with the cavalry myself, in the War Between the States," Sutcliff said. "Fifth Texas. Luckily, though, war didn't make a killer out o' me."

"Me neither," Waldron flared. "How come this Cantrell's so interested? Givens seemed to be top-hand folks, while that rancid little—"

"You're right," Sutcliff interrupted. "Joe Givens came in as a nester, and as such I was against him; but he proved to be a hard-working and thrifty good neighbor, and I'm sorry he's gone."

Then Sutcliff told of Cantrell, hired by Kitchel during the owner's absence, and later fired by the owner for being quarrelsome and shifty. Lately—having been blacklisted by the Stockgrowers' Association and unable to get a riding job—he'd been holed up in an abandoned shack on Little Powder, living on pronghorn and sage-hen meat, and probably somebody else's veal.

"Yet you're holding me because a no-good saddletramp like that said—"

"The evidence is all against you," Sutcliff broke in. "This mornin', early, Cantrell stopped by Givens' shebang to say howdy, and found Joe dead and his place ransacked. He came hellin' into my bailiwick to report it, and tell about the south-headed pony with the toed-in hind foot."

Sutcliff went on to tell of sending two of his crew up to bury Joe and turn out any corralled horses; of not sending word to the sheriff because the sheriff was leading a posse down Pumpkin Buttes way, hunting a gang who'd robbed a Burlington and Missouri train near Newcastle and hightailed west.

While listening, Waldron had been eyeing the country through which they rode; good knee-high gramma in the draws, but otherwise a jumble of buttes and coulees, cutbanks, and rocky ridges dotted with boulders, juniper trees and prickly pear. "Wouldn't the sheriff have left a deputy at Gillette?" he asked.

Sutcliff nodded. "A scissorbill who couldn't track a load of hay across a snow-covered pasture. Kitchel, my foreman, wanted to come with Cantrell to cut for sign, so I came along for more reasons than

to see the graze in this far corner of my layout. I want Joe's murderer punished, but I knew full well that Cantrell would have no more conscience than an Apache—as you found out."

"Well, I'm obliged to you for snubbin' him down," Waldron sighed. "But save for your comin' I'd be free. While in the Army I got right handy with a Colt, and I doubt if those two up ahead have much stomach for the kind of a dust-up they'd have run into by comin' closer. Now, dammit, I'm really up against a knot. Trazlor likely won't lend a hand, and I've got no money to hire a lawyer. With the brass-bound evidence against me, and Givens bein' well-liked hereabouts, I may get railroaded. Reckon I'll even be lucky to get safely in that jail."

"I'll see to that," Sutcliff promised. "Come mornin'—"

Abruptly as a thunderclap, hell came out of its shuck. Up ahead a gun slammed, and Kitchel and Cantrell came back-trailing as though the heel-flies were after them. "What goes on?" Sutcliff yelled, lifting the Winchester from his lap.

"Looks like we ran into them train-robbers and they've mistook us for a posse," Kitchel panted, hauling up and drawing his gun.

"I ain't lost nothin' here. Let's pull foot," Cantrell suggested, his voice tight with anxiety.

"Pull foot, hell," Sutcliff growled, standing in his stirrups to better scan the caprock up ahead. "I won't have that kind of polecats—"

Waldron's mind was racing like a dried tumbleweed in a gale. He knew that should Sutcliff be hit, his unarmed prisoner would be at the mercy of the other two. *If the chance comes I'd best run for it . . .*

Apparently seeing movement in the cover on the ridge Sutcliff fired, and a gun up there bit right back. "Judas!" he said as his hat flew off. "Let's go after 'em!"

Obviously forgetting Waldron, he and Kitchel spurred away. Cantrell's roan wanted to go too, but his rider didn't; and as they fought it out, Waldron rode in, snatched Cantrell's gun from its holster, knocked the jasper out of his saddle and headed south like a spooked jackrabbit.

Waldron's first obligation was to take the money safely to his boss. After that he could dally in gun fights.

FLICKING a glance backward he saw that the roan had run off, saddle-gun and all; and that Cantrell—unarmed and afoot—was prancing around and yelling. Though plainly without guts, he'd sure be a hard customer if he ever got Waldron cornered again.

The dun had a reaching foot, and by the time he'd begun to blow they were a long wolf-howl away. Some of the tension had worked out of Waldron and he was glad to pull up to a trot, check the loads in the captured Smith and Wesson, and holster it. The sun was getting way westerly, and the sooner it was gone the better. He'd do the best he could to fog up his trail, but old Sutcliff could likely track a bee through a blizzard, and while light remained there was danger.

But full dark might bring trouble of another kind. If the sky remained clear, he'd have the stars to guide him, but should those clouds building up in the south spread all over, he'd be out of luck. He'd have to wait it out in some coulee with no fire, grub nor blankets; and his still-weak leg was getting unsociable. Compared to these last few hours, campaigning in Cuba had been pleasant and easy as eating peaches out of a can.

At a walk, now, he came to a game-and-stock trail heading down to a clump of willows and cottonwoods. There'd be water there, but badly as he and the dun wanted a drink, he checked the pony's turn that way and crossed the trail. No use taking chances.

But the usually tractable dun was stub-

born. Again he headed that way; but instead of moving forward he planted his feet, pointed his ears, and began to blow through his nostrils. Then a flock of jays fled screaming from the willows, and Waldron felt his nerves tighten again. Could be that only thirsty cows had stirred the birds; but it could be Tomahawk riders headed home for supper, and Waldron preferred to go his way unnoticed.

Then a horse and rider exploded into sight, then two more, coming like boogered pronghorns. Leaning from his saddle, one of the latter arrivals grabbed the leading horse's check-piece and jerked it to a sliding halt.

Having instinctively drawn his gun and reined the dun behind a boulder, Waldron watched. Busy with their private ruckus the newcomers hadn't seen him, and he could still likely get away unseen; but he somehow felt obliged to find out more about this, for the rider whose pony had been caught was a woman.

Though hampered by a long skirt, side-saddle and plunging horse, she was fighting like a bobcat to retain possession of her gun. But, crowded close by two grown men, she hadn't a chance. The jasper in the floppy hat held her right wrist high, and the other tough twisted the blue metal from her grasp and flung it away.

Waldron was riled at what he saw, but hesitated. He was already drowning in trouble, and had in his care a big jag of money belonging to his boss. If he waded into this—*Well, here we go again,* he decided, lifting his reins.

Still trying to subdue the obstreperous girl, the two rannies neither saw nor heard him coming. Then one did. Loosing a yell —and his hold on the girl—he clawed out his gun. It spat fire, and a slug snipped a piece from the shoulder of Waldron's coat.

And Waldron couldn't fire back lest he hit the girl. The other hoodlum opened up; but his horse, too, was doing a do-ci-do and his shots went wild. Standing now, in his stirrups, Waldron swerved to avoid a collision and chopped down with his gun. The long heavy barrel collapsed the crown of a Stetson and the man beneath it. Away went his terrified horse, dragging its owner whose foot was caught in the stirrup.

Whirling the dun, Waldron faced a gun-flash that all but scorched his hat, but the bullet went way off yonder. From the tail of his eye he'd seen the girl fighting her rearing mount well out of the way, so he fired at the remaining man. With a grunt the fellow reeled in his saddle, then spilled out; and one shod hoof of his departing pony finished him.

WALDRON reined the dun around. "Here, now," he panted, catching the bridle of the girl's horse. Then he looked at the girl.

Her hat and black hair were somewhat disarranged, and her shirtwaist had pulled away from the top of her riding-skirt, but in spite of the hell she'd been through she wasn't much upset. "Thank you," she said, stroking the neck of her now-quiet sorrel. "These parts seem to be getting crowded. No elbow room."

"Very little," he grinned, stepping down to straighten his saddle. "Better leave me cinch up that rig of yours, too. Then we'll haul out before another crowd collects. Where d'you live?"

Without help she'd dismounted. "I'm really home now," she said, glancing about for her gun. "This is my father's land."

His head jerked up. "Tomahawk? Sutcliff your father?"

She nodded. "You know him?"

"Slightly."

"Good. He'll be glad to see you again, and thank you for this."

Without answering, Waldron turned. His bad leg was giving him hell to the handle and he limped, walking up the trail to where his first victim lay. Horrible to look at, the man was dead as a can of corned beef. His horse, bearing the Tomahawk

brand, was now calmly grazing a few yards away. A frazzled boot still rode in a disarranged stirrup. Stripping off the gear, Waldron let the horse go.

He'd sure got his tail in another crack now. Darkness was near and he'd have to see the girl home. No doubt about that, with the country seemingly full and running over with rough characters. And what he'd run into to Tomahawk headquarters wasn't likely to be good, regardless of the fact that Sutcliff was now beholden to him. "Well, there's no out," he sighed, turning back.

"If Nate Petrie's dead it serves him right," the girl said when he'd returned. "My father fired him a year ago for pestering me. Since, he's been in all manner of scrapes, and I'd not be surprised were he one of those train-robbers. Knowing we run good horses, they likely cut up this way to get fresh ones."

"Who was the other?" Waldron jerked his head toward the nearest corpse.

She shrugged. "Don't know. Probably another of our Hole-in-the-Wall neighbors. And I've been wondering about you. I thought I knew everyone in Campbell County, especially my father's friends—"

"We're not exactly friends, ma'am. He don't even know my name, which is Waldron. We met under rather peculiar circumstances, and parted the same way. For a brief time this afternoon I was his prisoner."

"Prisoner!" She'd found her gun, and with hand at hip level she had it pointed at him. "Then you're just another—"

"No." Wearily he shook his head. "I'm harmless as a pet rabbit, and if you'll put that thing away and mount up, we'll be going. I'll tell you the story as we ride."

Studying him through the gathering dusk, she mentally picked the idea apart through a long moment's silence. Then, having apparently made her decision, she turned and hauled herself into the saddle. But as she arranged her long skirt, he saw that she still carried the shooting iron in her hand.

"If you'd feel easier, ma'am, you can trail me," he said, stepping aboard the dun.

"Very well. Get going."

SLOUCHED in the saddle, he rode along, keeping to a walk because he and the dun were both worn and weary. He wonderd about the girl. She was a long-geared outfit and very pretty. Sure a cool customer, too; well able to take care of herself where the odds were even.

Then he fell to thinking of her father, owner of the biggest spread in Powder River valley. While everybody around didn't like him by a hell of a sight, all agreed—even the dry-farmers and cowpen ranchers—that he was fair and square.

Sutcliff had said that Trazlor was a crook, so maybe working for Trazlor hadn't been such a fine thing after all. Anyhow, that job was gone. He'd really killed two men now, and a prosecuting attorney would argue the jury into believing that even though the two deserved killing, the jasper who'd done it thereby proved himself to be just the sort of an impulsive-with-a-gun pelican to have murdered Joe Givens. Then, a choke-rope for ex-corporal Waldron of the First U. S. Volunteer Cavalry.

"Mr. Waldron," the girl called softly. "I guess this is really silly. I'm coming up beside you."

Briefly he told his story then, and she heard him through. "How ridiculous," she said. "If papa came through that fight which was building up when you left, he's no doubt in a mood to comb you out for giving him the slip, but when he finds out how lucky it was that you did, he'll—"

"He can't do a thing but turn me in, ma'am," Waldron cut in. "And I don't want him to feel the least bit in my debt. I only hope that Cantrell and Kitchel don't manage to get me between a rock and a hard place."

"Ah, those two! Bones Cantrell is lower than a snake in a wheel-rut, and I some-

times wonder if Flint Kitchel is entirely trustworthy."

It was Waldron's opinion that there was little to choose between them, save that Kitchel had more nerve, but he kept his lip buttoned. Instead, he said, "How come you were so far from home, knowin' that train-robbers and such truck were around?"

"I'll bet papa is using words that couldn't go through the mail," she chuckled. "And I'll admit it was risky, but a nester living just outside our south line-fence has an ailing wife. I was down there last week with medicines, and promised to be there again today, so I kept that promise. Heavens, if I stayed inside every time there's danger about, I'd be cooped up all the time. Since my mother died, papa centers all his attention on me, acts as though I were a piece of fine china, or something equally fragile, and it's smothering. I sometimes—"

"Listen," Waldron whispered, touching her arm.

Sure as sunup there were riders nearby. Shod hoofs clattered on rocks, and a man cleared his throat. Waldron felt his empty stomach go into another spasm. Grasping her horse's cheek-piece he moved off the faint trail into a jungle of junipers. If it were Tomahawk riders she was safe as a church, but should it be some of those roughs. . . .

Swinging down he grabbed the muzzles of both ponies to stifle any whinnies; but the dun objected to that, raising such a ruckus that one of the sharp-eared riders heard it, and hell was out for recess again.

"Who's there?" a truculent voice demanded as a gun-hammer snicked back.

"Sounds like Dan Ebert, one of our boys," the girl whispered. "Shall I answer?"

Waldron considered. Nothing to be gained by taking a chance. Should these be Tomahawk hands looking for her, let them go on if they would. Better that her father worry a little longer than—

"C'mon, you dam' fool," another voice grumbled. "What you heard was cows or loose horses."

"No such thing. Belle, you there?"

"I know it's Dan," she told Waldron. "Yes," she called.

Well, that settled it; but Waldron didn't let his caught breath go. Some hoodlum might know her name and be playing a snide trick—

Three evenly-spaced shots tore the stillness. The flashes punched upward. A hoarse shout answered from some distance away. "Come on," Belle said as he forked the dun again. "That's papa, sure enough."

And papa, sure enough, came a-smoking. "Where'n the yellin' hell you been, Belle?" he stormed, in a voice like a West-Texas wind, while still yards away. "Of all the dam' fool—"

"I was all right," she cut in when he'd come to a rearing halt beside her. "Mr. Waldron was bringing me home."

"Who's Waldron? Where is he?" Sutcliff peered around in the darkness.

"Right here," Waldron said. "Sorry I had to high-tail away from that fight this afternoon, but—"

"Well, damn your eyes, anyhow!" Sutcliff exploded. "I'd begun to build right up to you, and then—"

"You won't git away this time, friend." The voice was Cantrell's. Kneeing his pony through the crowd of recently-arrived riders he lifted his carbine. "No onion-eyed polecat can clout me like you done and —Where's my gun?"

"He put it to better use than you would have, you weasel," Belle flared. "He risked his life—"

"To save you?" Sutcliff roared. "Dan, take that thing away from Cantrell and don't give it back till I say so. That will be in the mornin', Cantrell. You can stay at my place tonight, but come sunup you haul out and don't ever set foot on Tomahawk again. Now, Belle, tell me—"

"When we get home, papa. Both Mr. Waldron and I are hungry. Come on."

Waldron wished that Kitchel had also been disarmed, but likely the foreman knew better than to try anything tonight. . . .

WHEN they finally reached the ranch-house yard Waldron began to off-sad-sadle, aiming to rub down the bone-weary dun and grain him. But Sutcliff told one of the boys to do it, and took Waldron and his saddle-bags into the house. "Ike," he told an old smooth-bore in the kitchen. "Rustle some grub for these folks. Now, Waldron— What's your first name, anyhow?"

"Reid."

"Well, Reid—" Sutcliff led the way into a bedroom and lit a lamp. "Just make yourself at home. I'll fetch hot water."

When Sutcliff returned he suggested stowing the saddle-bags in his safe, and Waldron gladly agreed after removing his few items of personal gear. He also gave up Cantrell's gun. "We'll call when supper's ready," Sutcliff said, going out. "Help yourself to that bourbon."

After having his drink Waldron washed, brushed his hair and got into clean socks and shirt. Then he lay down across the bed.

Now what? he wondered.

All he expected of Sutcliff was safe conduct to the jail. Then he'd be on his own, with no real friends to lend a hand. Probably the court would appoint an attorney to defend him, likely a down-at-the-heels coot knowing no more law than he'd got by being hit over the head with a Blackstone during a barroom brawl.

Matter of fact, a lawyer shouldn't be needed. He could tell his own story straight as a wagon tongue; and if the jury was made up of fair-minded men, and the prosecuting attorney wasn't dead set on getting a conviction no matter what, everything would be fine.

But the prosecutor would likely pack the jury with Joe Givens' friends, then muddy the whole thing up with words running no more than eight to the pound. Waldron, being foreign to these parts, with nobody to vouch for his good character, would have no chance.

Were Captain Bucky O'Niel alive he'd sure enough do something for his former trooper. Bucky had been a big man in Arizona; sheriff, mayor of Prescott and such-like. But Bucky was dead, shot in the head at San Juan Hill.

Colonel Teddy Roosevelt, a nabob back East somewhere, had always been pleasant as a sunny day too, and would no doubt be glad to send a letter to the judge, but Waldron didn't know where to write to Teddy.

Then Sutcliff rapped on the door and, putting on his boots, and the coat with the bullet-tear in the shoulder, Waldron went out to supper.

Already seated at the lamp-lit table, Belle looked finer than peach-fuzz. She really was pretty, scrubbed pink and clean, and all pranked out in a dimity dress. "Sit down," she smiled, indicating a chair.

Sutcliff was there too, smoking a cigar; but he kept silent while Ike brought the food and the young folks ate. Only when they'd finished the pie did he open up. "Have a cigar and more coffee," he said to Waldron.

"Belle's told me the whole story," he continued when Waldron had his smoke going. "Damned fine job you did and I'm grateful."

"But he still insists on turning you over to the law," Belle said. "I've argued and argued—"

"He's right," Waldron told her. "What happened this evenin' didn't change things any, and I don't expect any favor because of it. Besides, I want to have my name cleared of suspicion."

Sutcliff nodded, and abruptly changed the subject. "If you were able to land that job with Trazlor, and get a bond, you must

be a cut above the average ranch-hand. How long you been punchin' cows, and where?"

Waldron told him, and—while Belle got her sewing-basket and repaired his coat—they talked of horses, cows, grass and water. Finally the coat was fixed and Sutcliff announced it was way past bedtime.

"Mind if I palaver a little with the cook?" Waldron asked as they rose.

"Quale? No, go ahead," Sutcliff said. "But don't try to run out on me again because I'm right certain Cantrell's waitin' for you to try just that. No doubt he's got hold of another gun by this time."

"Flint Kitchel's, probably," Belle surmised. "Well, good-night."

Waldron sauntered into the kitchen where Quale, grumpy as a bear with bunions, was finishing up the dishes. "You've somehow got the earmarks of a man who's done some soldierin'," Waldron said.

"Quale tried to straighten his bent old back. "Dam' right. Sixth Cavalry, down in Arizona chasin' 'Paches."

Waldron grinned. It had been a shot in the dark, an opening for a conversation during which he hoped to learn things. If he could get Quale on his side, maybe he—"I was a horse-soldier for a short time, myself," he said. "Rough Riders."

Quale turned. "The hell you preach. Leonard Wood's outfit?"

"Till he got promoted. You know Wood?"

"Was his dog-robber when he first come as a contract surgeon. After that I was cookin' fer the officers' mess at Fort Huachuca, and he et there. Good hombre. I hear you're in somewhat of a jackpot in spite of takin' Miss Belle away from that fly-blown Nate Petrie."

"Somewhat," Waldron agreed. "Tell me, is—"

Soon he'd learned that Kitchel—as hard a man as ever looked over gun-sights—craved to have Belle for his wife so as to eventually be top dog at Tomahawk. Sutcliff no doubt saw through him, but kept Kitchel on because of his knowledge of horses and cows, and ability to handle men. No one knew anything for certain of Kitchel's past, but Cantrell seemed to have been a part of it.

So much for that. Now the rest. The boys who'd buried Joe Givens reported that he'd been shot in the back and didn't seem to have been dead since the day before as Cantrell had guessed. Joe's rifle, gun and watch were gone, his pockets inside out, and every place where money could have been hidden was pulled apart. "Givens sold some calves this spring and didn't bank the *dinero* in Gillette, so somebody figgered he had it cached," Quale said, finishing his work. "Hope they don't pin it on you."

Waldron went to bed then, and lay thinking, trying to recall everything said and done during the short time he'd been at Givens'. Joe had been pleased as a kid pulling a pup's ears because he was getting clear of debt. He'd been affable, offered a drink, in fact. They'd had some difficulty making exact change, and Waldron had jokingly offered a Spanish coin, a *peseta* which he'd won in a poker game in Cuba and had ben carrying as a lucky-piece. Givens had said he'd admire to have it as a souvenir, so the change was made and Givens took Waldron's receipt. Whoever killed Joe had probably found the receipt and destroyed it, but the coin. . . .

SLIDING off to sleep then, Waldron knew no more till a rowdy-dow broke loose outside. Horses snuffled and stamped, bits jingled and men cussed wearily. The eastern sky was paling a little, but save for the light through the windows of bunkhouse and mess-shack, the yard was dark. The sharp odor of smoke from the breakfast fire pricked his nostrils like needles. Waldron got up and dressed.

Cat-footing into the kitchen for shaving water, he learned from Quale that the sheriff's posse had arrived, beat out from a

fruitless all-night ride in pursuit of the train-robbers. Sutcliff was out there now, telling of his brief brush with three hombres the day before, and of the attack on Belle.

At least I'll have a big escort down to the county-seat, Waldron reflected wryly as he stropped his razor. The tension was building up in him again. The idea of going to jail somehow seemed worse today than it had yesterday. Maybe it was because he'd met a pretty girl, and knew he'd enjoy being a cowpoke again, riding for Tomahawk. Or maybe it was like a saying he'd heard once, something about the love of liberty burning brightest in a dungeon.

Sutcliff called him to breakfast then. Out in the mess-shack the bunkhouse crew and posse members were clattering their plates and eating tools, but Sutcliff and another man were at the table in the house. Belle was not.

Right off Waldron guessed that the tired-looking old jasper was the sheriff, and he was right. Sutcliff introduced him as Valentine Zinn.

Zinn didn't seem to pay Waldron much heed, just went to wolfing his grub and saying nothing. Waldron, jumpy as a cat on ice, didn't talk much either; and his food didn't taste very good. He was fretting with an idea, and how he could put it over.

By the time they'd cleaned up the flapjacks and Arbuckle's it was light outside. Zinn gnawed off a chew and went out with Sutcliff. Waldron followed. His heart was slugging as though trying to bust through his ribs. "Gentlemen," he said, like he'd heard Colonel Roosevelt address his collected officers. "So far I'm holding a deuce-high hand in this game, and I'd like to draw two more cards and see what turns up."

Sutcliff fingered his mustache. "What's on your mind?"

"Let's get Cantrell and Kitchel out here, then let me play my own hand."

Sutcliff nodded and sent for the two who, as though smelling trouble, came stiff-legged and slowly, like two wary dogs.

Waldron's quick eyes worked them over. Cantrell wore no gun, unless it was under that cardigan jacket; but Kitchel's rode in its holster. He'd apparently just strapped it on, and hurriedly, because the tongue of the belt wasn't in its keeper.

"Cantrell, you're caught in your own loop," Waldron said when they'd stopped a horse-length away.

"Guessin' that Givens had money cached away," he went on, "you got gold colic, made a play for it, and lost. Then, to cover your tracks, you tried to throw the blame on me. That's why you were so dam' anxious to string me up, knowin' that if I came to trial some evidence might turn up, somethin' you overlooked, that would bring you into it."

A trickle of tobacco juice was oozing from each corner of Cantrell's slack mouth. His smoking eyes were just slits, darting to Sutcliff, to Zinn, and back to Waldron.

Standing a little spraddle-legged, Kitchel seemed to be leaning away from Cantrell, but his bleak gaze never left Waldron. Other men, leaving the mess-shack, stopped to watch; but took care they stopped near cover. Waldron heard Sutcliff and Zinn move away from behind him. The air was full of something about to happen.

"Tell it to the judge," Cantrell said, the words coming out like sandpaper.

Waldron's throat was dry as hot ashes. "I can't wait for that. You might happen to see what a dam' fool thing you've done, and cover up. You never should have taken that Spanish *peseta* from Givens' pocket. It won't pass for money in this country. You can't let anybody see you've got it, for it hangs the murder on you just as sure as hell can scorch a feather. Givens got that *peseta* from me, Cantrell; and I can bring witnesses to prove I had it. I can identify it by—"

Like a striking rattler Cantrell's hand moved, plucking a gun from inside his jack-

(Please continue on page 112)

BORN TO THE SMOKY STAR

By George FitzHugh

Did that prideful old town-tamer will his son anything more than his battered, bullet-bitten badge?

YOUNG Bud Harvey stood a little apart from the crowd on Boothill. He stood very still, with his shoulders stiffly thrown back, his gray eyes looking toward the jagged purpling peaks of the Sawtooths, just as old Marshal Bill Harvey would have stood. While the deputies lowered the best coffin west of Denver into the yellow clay, Bud Harvey's sweating fingers closed a little harder over his dad's badge in his pocket.

Never would Bud Harvey forget the grizzled old town-tamer who, just two short nights ago, had gone out in smoke and gun-thunder, after all but wiping out Big Ear Finny's bunch of rimrockers. Never would he forget the wounded deputy staggering on the porch of the Harvey cottage, the mute look of sympathy in the deputy's eyes as his bloodstained hand held out the gold badge which Bill Harvey had worn for twenty years.

"The last thing he did was to unpin his badge, kid," the wounded deputy told him, " 'Give it to Bud,' he says. 'It's the thing that I'm most proud of in my life—that I've fought for the hardest. Mebbe some day Bud will win his right to wear it. . . .' "

Since that long-ago day when Piney Butte had presented his dad with that embossed gold badge, Bud had been signaled out as "The marshal's kid." Among those of his own age, he had been looked upon with a certain amount of awe; his elders treated him with that special manner reserved for those close to the great. It had been enjoyable, that basking in Bill Harvey's reflected glory, but it had done Bud Harvey no good.

If he had never realized that fact, it was sure that none of the oldsters who now looked at him did, either. Certainly not Mayor Roberts, red-whiskered and pompous, who was just ending a long-winded speech.

". . . He left behind the memory of courage, an' a son." The mayor gesticulated dramatically to where Bud stood. "A son who, we all agreed last night in council meetin', we'll swear in to wear his dad's badge."

Bud moved forward proudly, his heart beating high. And then, in response to a nudge by the mayor, he laid his hand on his father's gun. He swore solemnly never to quit his search for the renegade leader, Big Ear Finny, and to kill him when he found him.

But Harvey made only a tolerable deputy, the first three months he was on the job. He was only a youngster, and it was natural that the lowliest jobs should be assigned him. But he did them in a don't-give-a-damn way that more than once irritated newly appointed Marshal Buckner, Bill Harvey's old chief deputy. Buckner won-

dered if Bud's dad would have let him get away with it. . . .

Maybe it was bad luck on Bud's part that Marshal Buckner and his posse, as well as many other citizens, were absent from Saddlerock that drowsy noontime when Big Ear Finny rode down Placer Street, proud as you please, one hand on his hip, holding the reins, the other hand on his gun-butt. But Bud Harvey didn't know about it, because Bud Harvey was asleep in the big chair in the marshal's office.

The first thing that Bud Harvey knew, he was being yanked to his feet by a strong grip on his ears; his holster was lightened, and then he was being kicked down Placer Street, receiving the most thorough gun-whipping that a man can get and still live. They found him there, in the dusty ruts of the road, a scrawled note pinned to his vest:

> Your dad was a man, an' he got killed like one. You ain't worth the killin'. I'll be back an' get that tin badge which you aint got the guts to wear.
>
> Big Ear Finny.

It was only then that Bud found the bank robbed and the teller murdered.

Later, in the town hall, Mayor Roberts and Marshal Buckner shook their heads. "Too young, too untried," Buckner said.

Unthinking, the mayor said, "Bud, hand over yore badge, and—" He stopped at the look which had suddenly come into Bud's eyes.

"That badge is personal property. It was given my dad and he gave it to me. You can stop me from wearin' it, maybe, but no man'll ever take it from me!"

"Not even Big Ear Finny?" said the mayor softly.

For a minute the blood drained from the kid's face. Again he remembered the sickening thud of those blows with the pistol barrel, and the note. . . . He wet his lips, but somehow the words wouldn't come.

BUT HE soon found what hell it was to be a bum, a beggar and barroom tramp in a town which had once acclaimed him.

Now, out of money, whitefaced, he was begging his drinks down at the Bucket of Blood.

The young derelict's shaking, palsied hand closed on something round in his pocket. He tossed it on the bar. "This oughta buy one, then."

Bud Harvey came to later in the stables. It was still dark, and at first, dizzy, sick and confused, he wondered how he'd gotten there. Then with the force of a vivid nightmare it came back to him. His hand went to his pocket. . . . The badge was gone! begging his drinks down at the Bucket of Blood.

Unsteadily he lurched into the batwing doors. And as he paused there for a moment, his shaken senses refused to register what he saw. The customers, house tinhorns and the barman were lined against the side wall, their hands raised under the guns of a masked outlaw, as another emptied the till.

"Some fool lawman's put his badge in hock," said the one at the till.

The masked gunman laughed, stamped his bootheel on it. "I promised I'd collect that some day," he drawled.

He didn't get any farther, because, for the first time in months, Bud Harvey came back to life. How he managed to reach the gun and drag it from the man nearest him, no one knows to this day. But suddenly he was on the floor, one hand clutching the badge and the other triggering a six-shooter.

When Marshal Buckner got there, his old-fashioned nightshirt tucked into his pants, he found Big Ear Finny dead, and dead also was the other renegade.

Marshal Buckner was a smart lawman. "Take Bud to the doc's pronto," he said. "And God help the gent who touches that badge. She's there now—to stay!" ★ ★ ★

Buck Connor was coming home after ten years, to two men who were waiting for him. The one who'd sentenced him to the rope—and the one who'd almost died saving him from it!

By John G. Pearsol

A tall, lithe figure stepped out from behind the bunkhouse, firing two guns.

GUNS OF THE LIVING DEAD

BILL BREEN lounged against the windowsill in the courtroom in Pyote. His big black hat was pushed back on his head, showing a little gray in the black of his hair at the temples. His eyes, as black as his hair, watched the figure of Bert Connor, haggard, staring, sitting like a stone man on the judges' bench. Before the judges' bench, young Buck

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Connor, pale, gray eyes fastened on his father, sat beside Sheriff Wycliff, a big, raw-boned gent, his hook nose giving his sharp face an eagle-like appearance. They were trying young Buck Connor for his life—in his own father's courtroom.

Flash Corlon, slim, dark as an Indian, and with a brilliant red neckerchief about his throat, came up to the stand. The prosecutor poured questions at him. Corlon grinned.

"Not much to it," he said silkily. "I was ridin' along an' heard a shot. I eased over to where it was an' seen Buck Connor standin' over Gene Pardo. Connor had a gun in his hand. An' Pardo had a hole in his back."

Young Buck Connor, his gray eyes afire, started to jump up, but the sheriff pulled him back.

Bill Breen still watched beside the open window. Outside two saddled broncs were tied handy. A gun hung on the horn of one of the saddles. Bill listened to a lot of evidence. His black eyes hardening, glinting with disgust, with hate, and with resolve, as he watched Judge Connor on the bench.

Frame up, he thought silently, eyes on Judge Connor. *Lousy frame-up. An' he ain't got sense enough to see it! The oozy-brained, stiff-necked fool!*

The trial dragged on. Judge Connor's face became more and more haggard. Breen's eyes became more and more glinty. Red fire glowed in their depths.

Sheriff Wycliff testified: "I happened along," he said, "an' much as I hate it, I gotta say Flash Corlon sure told the truth."

"The truth?" Bill Breen muttered, so softly that no one heard him.

Finally the arguments ended and the jury filed out of the room. Bill Breen eased over to just beside the window, took a little hitch at the heavy gunbelt that hung at his waist. Alternately, while he waited for the jury room door to open again, Breen looked at Judge Connor, then at Buck Connor, down there beside Sheriff Wycliff.

Then the door to the jury room opened. The twelve men came out, solemn faced stern, with a man's life in their hands. Bill Breen raised up straight on his feet. He waited, hand near the gun at his hip.

"Guilty," said the jury foreman. "Guilty of murder in the first degree."

OLD JUDGE CONNOR didn't move. He didn't look down at the boy in front of him. He waited just a moment, then his lips moved, making a monotonous, droning sound. Sheriff Wycliff pulled at Buck Connor's arm, and urged him to his feet as Judge Connor started to pronounce sentence.

"Buckly Connor, I sentence—you—to hang. . . ."

"Stop it!"

Bill Breen leaned forward at the window. His gun was hip high. It swung slowly. And it seemed that Breen's eyes watched everyone in that crowded courtroom at once. In the silence Breen's voice cracked sharply, a hateful mocking note in it, taunting, reviling.

"You!" he rapped. "You'd say—'to hang by the neck till you're dead. An' may God have mercy on your soul!' You'd put a rope aroun' the neck of your own boy. Kiddin' yourself that you're doin' your duty, that you're brave as hell to sacrifice everything for Law, an' Justice, an' Duty." His gun jerked slightly. "Keep your hand still, Sheriff!"

Breen cursed dryly in the silence. "But you ain't brave." He berated the judge again. "You're a yella-bellied hypocrite. You killed your wife to gain money and power. You worked her to death, worried her to death. Now you're gonna send her boy to a hangman's noose." Breen seemed about ready to spring upon the stone-faced judge, so tensely did he lean forward. "But you won't this time. . . ."

Breen motioned to Buck Connor with his free hand.

"Git goin', son," he said. "Out the window, Buck. When a woman-killin', boy-hangin' skunk won't take care of his own, then Bill Breen *will!*"

Like the black unwinking eye of a death-dealing snake, Breen's gun held the crowd while Buck Connor stepped through the window, down onto the back of one of the two broncs hitched just outside. Judge Connor's eyes were like two set jewels of deep gray as he watched. Then Bill Breen slipped one leg through the window.

He started the other up; but his foot slipped and his gun wavered. Like a striking snake, Sheriff Wycliff's hand moved. Smoke spouted from his gun. Breen toppled backward, smacked sickeningly on the ground.

A yell of rage from outside came from young Buck Connor as he thumbed lead through the open window from the gun that had hung on the saddle horn. Then hoofbeats clattered as Buck Connor rode out of town. And Bill Breen, flat on the ground, sprawled as though in death, a gaping hole in his throat.

Judge Connor came to life when he rushed out of the courtroom, looked down at the bloody form of a man who had been his friend for many a long year. He swallowed a lump in his throat, tore his eyes away from the trail that led out of Pyote, down which he knew his kid was pounding. He picked Bill Breen up in his arms and carried him to a doctor.

But Breen was in a bad way. The bullet that Wycliff had fired had passed through his neck and grazed his spine.

The sawbones shook his head. "You can't tell," was all he would say.

So Bert Connor took Breen out to the Connor ranch. The Bar C took in a lot of ground, but Judge Connor had neglected it plenty after his rise to the bench. There, he cared for Bill Breen, nursed him, made him live. But Breen was paralyzed. He couldn't move or speak. He sat for ten years in an invalid chair, just moving his eyes, watching Bert Connor, following his every movement with eyes that rebuked in their blazing depths.

And now, for the thousandth time, old Bert Connor spread a worn and faded letter in front of him, as he sat by a table in the front room of the Bar C ranch house. It was a letter he'd gotten nearly ten years ago, from young Buck Connor. It was postmarked from a town down near the Mexican Border. It read:

> Judge Connor:
>
> You're everything Bill Breen called you. You're worse. You sacrificed my mother for money and power. You were going to sacrifice me for the same thing. Your best friend, and my best friend was killed trying to help me. Someday I'm going to smash you. I'm going to take the things away from you that seem to mean more to you than your wife or your son.
>
> Buck Connor.

Then for the thousandth time Bert Connor said the same things to Bill Breen who was silent, motionless, chained by paralysis to his chair.

"Ten years now," old Bert Connor said. "An' he still thinks you're dead. He still must hate me, be aiming to smash me—his father!"

With a silent plea in their depths, old Bert Connor let his gray eyes search old Bill Breen's blazing orbs. Then he sighed, rose and stepped over to the window. The room was silent as Bert Connor gazed absently out into the darkness of the night.

Then Bill Breen's eyes blazed more brightly. The oil lamp, bracketed on the wall of the room, threw grotesque shadows as Breen cautiously moved his hands. Up, he forced them, slowly, awkwardly, as though he were practicing a thing that he had not fully accomplished for a long, long time. Clumsily, as though propelled by a slow-moving mechanism, Breen's supposedly paralyzed fingers opened and closed. Then he let his hands sink slowly into his lap again. His head moved as he watched them. A wild fierce light of glad-

ness came into his eyes. His lips moved, stiffly, awkwardly, unaccustomed whispers coming from them.

"Ten years," he whispered softly, "an' I'm gettin' well! Another week—"

Swiftly, as though whirling on a pivot, Bert Connor swung about when those soft whispers penetrated the deep silence of the room. Wide open, disbelief showed in his eyes as he stared hard at Bill Breen's now still and motionless form. Bert Connor leaned forward, raised his right hand and pointed a stiff forefinger at Breen.

"You—" he whispered almost inaudibly, "you—talked? Bill Breen, did you—talk?"

But Breen just sat there. Silent as death. Motionless. His eyes burning with the hate in them. Then Bert Connor let his rigid arm fall. His shoulders sagged and he walked slowly over and put a hand on Bill Breen's shoulder.

"I'm goin' loco, Bill, I guess," he muttered softly. "I'm hearin' things. It's gettin' me, I guess—these years of wantin' you an' him to know that I really wasn't Bert Connor then, back there ten years ago. I wanted lots for her and him. I let it go to my head, carried it too far. Mebby—someday. . . ."

Bert Connor walked to the door that opened to another room. He stopped, looked at the blankets that wrapped Breen's legs.

"I'm gonna write some letters," he said. "They got some more cows this last week. I don't believe we got a darn one left." He raised his hand, pushed his fingers through his white hair in a worried fashion. "I rode all day an' couldn't find a single Bar C. I let the last puncher go last week. But Bill," Connor turned, stepped over so that he could look into Bill Breen's eyes again. "If I could just have Buck back here, could just see him, I wouldn't give a solitary damn if they took the ranch house along with the cows!"

Breen shifted his eyes, watched Bert Connor's back till it was out of sight.

Then Breen moved again. His fingers worked, slowly, awkwardly. His legs moved slightly. Up, down, he moved them an inch at a time. And he whispered as he worked.

"Bert Connor," he whispered. "Dam' your soul! You're makin' it hard as hell for me to hate you!"

UP FROM the south, holsters thonged low on his hips, Kid Renault rode ahead of big Bull Capron and Oily Parsons. Topping the Terlinguas, dropping again to the grass flats, Kid Renault smiled bitterly as familiar range greeted his cold, gray eyes.

"Bar C range," the Kid said.

Big Bull Capron, massive-shouldered, squat, his bushy brows overhanging eyes of jet, looked about, watched for cattle sign. Oily Parsons, riding straight up, stiff in his saddle, turned his pale, expressionless face from side to side as his eyes roved the landscape.

"To me," Parsons opined, as they chopped through the grass plains, "this range looks like it's been stripped, plumb clean!"

Kid Renault nodded, thoughtful.

Up and down the hills the three rode, topped a rise that looked down at a valley across which four other riders pushed a bunch of steers, scraggy cattle, wild, evidently strays driven in from the hills. Kid Renault raised his right hand, stopped to watch.

Out from the other end of the valley, a lone horseman rode. Momentarily, as this lone rider spotted the cattle and their drivers, he stopped. Then, cautiously, stepping his bronc forward at an easy pace, he came forward. He held his bronc's reins in his left hand. Let his right hand dangle close to his right hip. Kid Renault's gray eyes narrowed. Motionless, the three atop the rise looked down at the scene below them.

The lone rider came closer. Under the

wide brim of his brown hat his hair glistened white in the light of the sun that neared the top of the Terlinguas to the west. The four who drove the cattle scattered. They spread fan-shaped, moved toward this one rider, converged on him like a huge-fingered hand closing on an object in its middle.

Glinting redly, the sun flashed on metal as a gun appeared in the hand of the lone rider. Smoke spouted from his lip. The four who closed in on him surged forward, spurred their mounts, flame and smoke moving forward with them as they fired.

Kid Renault rose in his stirrups. He waved his hand forward, sank spurs to his long-legged gray as he whipped a gun from leather.

"That scrap leans too much one way," he called. "I'm gettin' in it!"

Big Bull Capron uttered a bellow of joy as he pushed his big black forward, raced down the hillside with Kid Renault. Parsons, his slick black hair shining under his hat brim, came behind them.

Guns spoke warningly from their hips as they flashed through the tall bunch grass, pounded down like three straight-shot arrows at the fight below them. Gun raised for another shot at the four converging riders, the one lone horseman suddenly pitched out of his saddle. Guns spouted lead between Kid Renault, Capron, Parsons, and the four who had been driving the cattle. The four turned, raced away, firing shots of caution back over their shoulders.

Capron cursed grumblingly as Kid Renault stopped, turned and trotted his bronc to where the lone rider lay on the grassy plain. His hat had come off. His snow-white hair, glistening like polished silver in the sun, showed bright crimson at the left temple. It was old Bert Connor.

THE Kid was off his bronc. His lips were twisted into a bitter smile as he looked down for a moment at that white face below him. Then he was on his knees beside the craggy-jawed, bloody-headed Connor. He put his fingers at the wound on the old man's head, felt of the place where the bullet had gone. Then he lifted his finger to the old man's temple, felt for a heart pulse at this, the easiest place to tell when the heart is weak.

"Creased," he said, as he raised up again. And there was a peculiar, fire-lit gleam in Kid Renault's eyes.

But Bull Capron paid no attention to Kid Renault. Ruefully his shaggy brows drawn down in a frown, he watched the tiny specks that were the four riders which had been driving the cattle.

"That," he rumbled grumblingly, "was a scrap that wasn't a scrap. We never got close enough to hear a bullet sing!"

Oily Parsons smirked, made a grimace of disgust. "Only a fool," he said softly, "sticks his nose in fights that don't belong to him. We come here after cows."

Kid Renault turned his head sharply, looked steadily at Parsons for a moment. Then he looked at big Bull Capron, and that semblance of a smile quirked at the corners of his mouth.

"That's right," Renault murmured. "A gent should fight his own battles—by himself. I dragged you two up here, on a job I should of figgered to handle alone. I wanted to break a gent, smash him, pay him back for some high-headed notions he had. Notions that killed the two best friends I ever knew. I was gonna sweep the Bar C range clean, an' make it pay us. But it looks like somebody beat us to it. There ain't no easy money here. But I'm stayin', anyway. You gents better high-tail it south again. It's risky stayin' here. Up here I'm known as Buck Connor. There's two thousand dollars on my head, an' the John Laws'll be buzzin' around when they sight me."

Buck Connor swung atop his bronc, spurred out, caught the old man's bronc, trotted back and tied the reins to the saddle

roll rings in the back of his own kak. Then he stooped, picked up the limp form of old Bert Connor. He swung on his mount again. Big Bull Capron chuckled, a dry little laugh, but one that rumbled up deeply from his arched chest. He swung on his big black, pranced the dainty-footed mount beside Buck Connor's gray.

"To my way o' thinkin'," he rumbled, "Buck Connor sounds jes as good as Kid Renault. An' who cares a hell of a lot about a little buzzin' around by the John Laws?"

But Oily Parsons still stood beside his bronc. Through smoky, resentful eyes he watched Bull Capron ride away with Buck Connor. Then Parsons twisted his lips into a grimace again. He watched the two mount the rise at the other side of the valley. Then he swung into leather. He rode northward, cutting away from the trail taken by Capron and Buck Connor.

And atop the rise, Bull Capron stopped his black, turned in his kak and watched Parsons ride away.

"Parsons," he said disgustedly. "He ain't lost nobody else's fights. An'—it'd be kinda wise to remember, that two thousand bucks is a lotta money for Parsons, jes' for tellin' somebody where mebbe they might find Buck Connor."

STRAIGHT-BACKED, smoky eyes set straight ahead, looking out over the limp bundle in his arms, Buck Connor rode slowly northward. Bull Capron's deep-set eyes watched Buck Connor's bronzed face with a curious stare while they jogged on, side by side.

Bitter emotions played in Buck Connor's eyes, deepened the lines about his mouth. Bull Capron looked at old Bert Connor's white-haired head, smiled whimsically.

"You know this gent, mebbe?" he asked softly.

Slowly, Buck Connor looked down, studied old Bert Connor's white face.

"Yeah," he said, "I know this gent."

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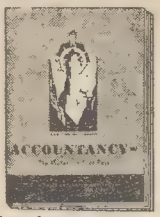

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But the lines were not so deep about his lips now. Nor the light so hard in his gray eyes.

The bronc's feet clumped softly into the turf, swished silkily through the bunchgrass. The old man stirred slightly in Buck Connor's arms. Low, almost indistinguishable mutterings came from his lips. Weakly, he raised a hand.

"All gone," he said feverishly, eyes closed, and repeating what he had told Bill Breen the night before. "No cows. No nothin'. But listen to me. If I had my boy back, jus' to see him, I wouldn't give a dam'. They could take—"

Then he relaxed again. Buck Connor's lips quirked. The deep lines about his mouth grew into bitter grooves.

Bull Capron squinted his eyes, but kept his tongue behind his teeth. Closely he watched Buck Connor, looked curiously at the white head of the old man, who now again was stirring restlessly.

Now Bull Capron's bronc threw up its head, nickered. Capron cursed softly, hand stabbing toward leather. Buck Connor eased the old man down, let him rest in front of him, held him with one hand, while his other strayed gunward. The broncs were stopped. The evening was still. The old man stirred again, muttering. His eyes fluttered open. But he appeared not to see.

Bull Capron cursed again. Four riders came out of the chaparral, converged on them, like the four who had downed old man Connor.

"It's them same gents," Capron cursed, "they think we seen too much. Git set, Kid. They're comin'!"

Buck Connor was off his gray, easing the old man down. Shaking him gently, dragging, making old Bert Connor's legs work, Buck Connor took him to the lead horse, hoisted him in the saddle. He put the old man's hands on the kak horn, studied him while he swayed there, his eyes open but unseeing; wobbly, but staying erect.

Bull Capron pranced his big black away, rode to meet those four converging riders.

"Git up an' comin', Kid," he called over his shoulder.

Now Buck Connor was ahorse again, beside old Bert Connor, steadying the old man, tying the reins to the kak horn. The old man stayed there, swayed, muttered as he balanced himself. A shot cracked over the flat. A bullet whizzed close to Buck Connor's head. He pointed the old man's mount northward, patted it gently on the rump, started it away at an easy walk.

Then Buck Connor's guns glinted in the red of the setting sun. His long-legged gray reached out, romped up beside Bull Capron's prancing black. Their guns blazed answers to the fire that belched out at them from the four riders. Sheer joy of battle glowed in Bull Capron's eyes as he snarled, cursed, threw lead at the four riders. And Buck Connor cut in beside Capron, sliced between the four fighting horsemen and the old man who rode slowly away.

"It's my fight," Buck Connor called to Bull. "That gent's my pap. I'm gonna hold 'em here till he gets away. Git goin' before the lead starts comin' too thick!"

Bull Capron cursed rumblingly. He laughed, whirled his black around beside Buck Connor's gray, faced the four riders now with old man Connor well behind them.

"Run yourself," yelled Capron. "Me, I'm gonna git me some bushwhacker meat!"

A long gun glinted in the hands of a rider as he stopped, threw a carbine to his shoulder, steadied for a shot at the now distant form of old man Connor. Buck Connor thumbed his six. The carbine-shooter's bronc reared, screamed. The carbine exploded in the air. Connor's .45's cracked again. The rifleman dropped his gun, tried to hold on to Heaven, then flopped on the ground while his bronc sank slowly to its knees.

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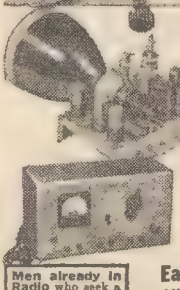

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Lead whispered ahead of the roar of guns. Bull Capron's big black reared, stumbled, fell. Capron leaped off, stalked forward, both guns blazing. Buck Connor swooped up beside him, sat his bronc stiffly while he pumped lead at the riders.

Now Bull Capron cursed again; his big hands let the guns slide from their grasp. His column-like legs wabbled. He staggered, fell, his voice bubbling in his throat as he stiffened on the ground.

"Give 'em hell, Kid," he whispered hoarsely, "give 'em—"

Buck Connor's gray leaped forward, a sizzling streak in the dimness of the evening. Leaning forward in his kak, Buck Connor thumbed both guns, poured a hail of death at the three riders ahead of him.

One! Two! Down off their broncs as if a giant hand had smitten them, two riders fell. Buck Connor stiffened, dropped one hand to clutch at his kak horn. His gray eased her stride. The one remaining rider in front of Connor pulled up his mount in a series of buck jumps, raised his gun. His gun blazed with Connor's. But it was the gent in front of Connor who toppled from his bronc.

Slowly, Buck Connor turned, eased his gray back beside the still form of Bull Capron. Stiffly, blood dripping from his left hand, Buck Connor got down, heaved Capron up across the saddle. Then Buck Connor rode slowly northward again as night settled. A coyote yammered, then snapped it off suddenly.

STILL, motionless in his invalid chair, Bill Breen sat looking out the open door of the Bar C ranch house. His black eyes, sunken in his now bony face, watched a shadow creep so very slowly across the yard in front of the house, as the sun sank in the west. Bitter, deep-cut, were the lines about his thin-lipped mouth; put there by ten years of imprisonment in the chair in which he sat.

Watching shadows creep across the yard —listening to the sounds of spur-trailed boot heels, but never making the sounds. Hearing the sounds of running broncs, but never riding them. Bill Breen raised his hands again, desperation in his black eyes. Cords, like tiny, writhing snakes, worked in his neck as he forced his arms, his hands, to move.

He moved his fingers. He pumped his legs up and down, raising his feet to the toes, then letting them sink back again. Shrilly, the whine of his fast-coming breath whistled through his teeth as he worked, practiced to release himself from the chain of paralysis that bound him. Finally, exhausted, he relaxed. His eyes closed. He breathed deeply.

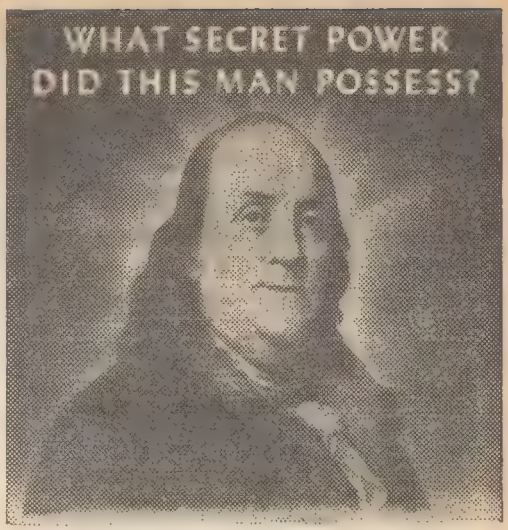
"Better," he whispered softly. "Better today than yesterday."

Then Breen's eyes opened again. The sound of hoof-beats coming in the ranch yard swelled to thunder, then sank again to swishing crunches as four riders swept around the corner of the ranch-house and pulled up in a cloud of dust. Guns glinted in the redness of the sun as four men swung off plunging broncs. Spurs clinked, boot heels pounded hollowly, as they trooped into the ranch house, stomping through the room in which Bill Breen sat, looking searchingly.

All but one of the four passed Bill Breen as though he had not been there. But one, pale-faced, a leather thong passed under his chin from his hat, stopped, looked curiously at this skeleton of a man who sat so motionlessly in the chair. It was Parsons, his eyes squinted in puzzlement as he stood before the invalid chair, his gun in hand.

The three others trouped back into the room, disappointment in their eyes, curses on their lips. The foremost, Sheriff Wycliff, his star glinting on his vest front, peered suspiciously at Oily Parsons.

"You wasn't havin' any pipe dreams,



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was you?" he asked. "Buck Connor ain't here. In fact there ain't nobody here. No broncs in the pen—"

Parsons spread his hands deprecatingly. "Did I say he was here?" he asked. "I said he was out there," he waved toward the south. "I was with him. There was an old jasper shot off his bronc. Then Buck Connor started this way. He was carryin' the old man. I—"

Flash Corlon, flashy conchos on his chaps, green neckerchief about his throat, cursed, plopped his gun into holster.

"Well," he cursed, "he ain't here, an' it's a cinch he won't come while this army's here!"

Sheriff Wycliff raised his gun, scratched his crooked nose with the barrel end. His eyes gleamed cunningly as he looked at Oily Parsons.

"That reward," he mused, "that you came hellin' into town to git—reads 'dead or alive' fella. So listen—you sit yourself out here near the corrals. You wait till this Buck Connor gent comes along. Hide your bronc so he won't know you're here. When he shows up—blow his belly out. We'll leave you a Winchester, an' jes' let your conscience be your guide as how you do it. Jes' git him, *sabe?"*

Oily Parsons looked into the sheriff's eyes. He grinned, nodded.

"I *sabe,"* he smirked, looked inquiringly at Bill Breen, sphinx-like in his chair. "Him?" he said, suggestively.

Wycliff turned, grinned mockingly down into the eyes of the man he had crippled with a shot from his gun ten years ago. For a long moment he looked deep into Breen's eyes. The hate in the eyes of the cripple seemed to infuriate the sheriff. Still watching Breen he waved to the others.

"Don't bother about this gent," he said raspingly, "he's been sittin' here for ten years. He can't move an' he can't talk. Go ahead. Git set."

While the others left, their spurs clink-

ing, footfalls fading, Wycliff still smiled down into Bill Breen's eyes. Cruelly, as though his animal-like nature derived pleasure from the torture of this helpless man whom he himself had hurt, Wycliff grinned mockingly and leaned closer.

"I'm gonna tell you a secret, Bill," he whispered, a world of sarcastic mockery in his voice. "You thought you was smart as hell didn't you, when you started your gun play in the courtroom that time. Thought you'd jerk Buck Connor outa my paws, easy, git away clean. But Bill, since you failed in your hero stunt, I'm gonna tell you a secret!" Wycliff's eyes blazed with wolfish cruelty.

"It was me," he whispered softly, "that killed Gene Pardo. Me an' Flash Corlon. Gene Pardo found out we was the ones that was rustlin' his stock. He got killed. Buck Connor happened along, so we killed two birds with one stone. We got rid of a stiff-necked, sanctimonious judge that—"

"Come on, Wycliff," Flash Corlon called.

Wycliff straightened, backed out the door, grinning at Breen. "Don't tell anybody what I told you," he said to Breen, then laughed cruelly as he went out the door.

Flash Corlon looked queerly at Wycliff, frowned, watched the lawman climb into his saddle. "What's so funny?" he asked.

Wycliff chuckled again. "I told Bill Breen a secret," he chuckled, "then I told him not to tell anybody!"

Flash Corlon turned his dark-skinned face around, looked at the Bar C ranch house, then frowned; looked at Wycliff.

"You're nuts," he stated coldly. "Bill Breen can't tell nobody nothin'."

BILL BREEN watched the ranch yard, saw Oily Parsons lead a bronc around to the side of the yard, then come back again. He carried a rifle in his hand, came up, looked into the room again and squinted at Bill Breen studiously.

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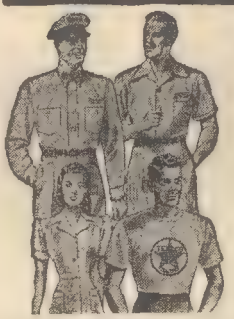

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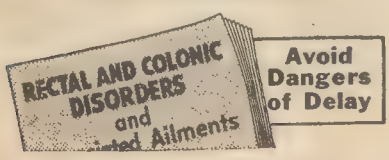

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"So you can't move," he said, "an' you can't talk."

Like a snake's, unblinking, blazing with fire, Bill Breen's eyes looked back at Parsons. But he was still, motionless. Parsons shook his head, sighed nervously.

"Spooky," he said, shaking his head again as though to free himself of Bill Breen's burning gaze.

He went across the yard, the rifle in the crook of his arm. At the corrals he squatted down, thrust the rifle through the bars, settled himself till he was in nearly a prone position. Then nothing moved in the ranch yard but the shadow that crept so slowly across it. Bill Breen's eyes fastened themselves on the shadow, watched it crawl.

Buck Connor was coming home—old Bert Connor had been shot—a killer was waiting with a rifle—Wycliff had murdered Gene Pardo—Wycliff didn't want Bill Breen to tell anybody. . . .

A low, unnatural, cackly laugh came from Bill Breen's stiff lips. Like the blaze that had been in his eyes ten years ago, in the courtroom at Pyote, fire showed in Breen's eyes now.

Slowly, his hands moved. Down, under the blankets about his shriveled legs they moved. Up, with a heavy gun in his grasp. Slowly, oh, so slowly, Bill Breen raised that gun, lined it with that snake-like figure by the corrals, ready to strike death at Buck Connor.

Bill Breen's lips opened. Deeply, he breathed. He called, softly. He tried again. His voice was hoarse, unreal. Oily Parsons turned, squirmed around on the ground, looked suspiciously in the room where Bill Breen sat. The call came again:

"Snake. Bushwhacker. Take—"

Twisting, writhing around like a cat reversing ends, Parsons whirled, turned his rifle loose toward the open door from which Bill Breen called. But fire flamed from that doorway. Once. Twice. Oily Parsons shook as though hit by a giant fist.

He shuddered. His rifle dropped unfired. Then he sank down, slowly, trying to keep his face off the dirt with his hands. Then, suddenly he relaxed, his head thumping on the sand.

It was quiet for a while. The creeping shadows lengthened, slithered slowly across the ranch yard. A road-runner stepped jerkily out of the shadows at the edge of the ranch yard clearing, then raced across the yard, like a miniature ostrich. The red tip of the setting sun glanced its crimson rays upward, off the sierra tops, threw red streaks into the heavens.

But out in the yard, sheltered in the shadows, Oily Parsons' limp form stirred. Slowly, shaking, crawling, inch by inch, the shadowy figure wormed away from the corral, crawled around the ranch-house. Painfully, blindly, he pulled himself up to the kak on the bronc tethered at the rear of the house. Feebly, wabbling in the saddle, clutching at the kak horn, Parsons touched his boot heels to the bronc's sides, and rode northward, silently, slowly, while the bronc's feet whispered faintly in the bunch grass.

SHERIFF WYCLIFF let his boot heels clump noisily on the floor of the sheriff's office when the bloody thing that had been Oily Parsons crawled in through the open door. Parsons' eyes were glassy. His whole side was a mess of blood and dirt.

"That gent," he gurgled, "the paralyzed fella. He—he talked—an' shot—"

Then more blood ran out of Parsons' mouth, and he didn't say anything more.

His tongue coming out, running around his dry lips, Wycliff just stood there, looked down at the mess on the floor at his feet. Gradually a normal look came back into his eyes. He looked out in the street, saw the bronc that Parsons had fallen from. He leaped out to the boardwalk, ran down to a door that had a lot of noisy music behind it. He kicked it open, ran in,

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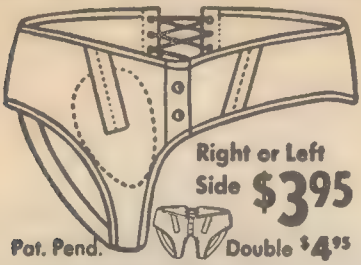

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up to the flashily dressed Corlon at the bar. Wycliff pulled Corlon away from the bar, whispered excitedly. Corlon's face got white.

The sheriff went to the office again. Corlon went down the other way. But in just a minute Corlon came back again with five gents behind him. They were all mounted on broncs now. Wycliff climbed on a mount, then they all raced out of town.

As if the Devil chased their tails they pounded out toward the Bar C. Nobody spoke. They sighted the buildings; saw a staggering form slide from a weary horse and enter the ranch-house door.

And then a cackly laugh sounded from the ranch-house. A raspy voice called out into the gloom. One of the riders shot swiftly at the man in the doorway.

The staggering oldster tumbled inside. And Bill Breen's ghostly voice crackled again through the night: "Wycliff! Bill Breen is talkin'! He's tellin' secrets!"

Wycliff raised his gun, flashed another shot through the open door.

"Breen an' Connor," Wycliff yelled. "Git 'em both! Breen can tell that it was us killed Gene Pardo!"

Men yelled. Horses screamed. Fire jumped from the ranch-house window. A tall, lithe figure stepped out from behind the bunkhouse, firing two guns.

It was Buck Connor, throwing lead at Wycliff and his riders!

Between two fires, Wycliff's riders milled, whirled, turned to face the Nemesis that stalked them from the shadows. Gun in hand, white hair glinting in the light of the pale moon, old Bert Connor staggered out of the ranch-house door. Flame flared from his hip as he swayed forward.

"You dirty, murderin' hound," he called to Wycliff as he fired.

Horses fell. Men went down. The little ranch at the foot of the Terlinguas was a shambles of death. Then all was quiet. A lone, swaying, staggering figure stood in

the ranch yard. Dumbly, he staggered about, blindly, nearly out on his feet; his gun glinting in the dimness of the light—Wycliff—was still a killer!

Then he steadied, watched a slow moving figure, saw Buck Connor struggle to rise. Up came Wycliff's gun. It steadied. A harsh laugh came from his twisted lips, while another figure moved, came slowly from the ranch-house door.

Specter-like it came, shaking-legged the thin, wobbling man moving forward—Bill Breen, walking forward on legs that had not moved for ten years. That shrill, cackly laugh came from his lips again. His gun flamed as Wycliff turned.

"Bill Breen," he shrilled, "payin' a debt, Wycliff!"

Then Breen watched Wycliff crumple, die. Laughing a bit wildly he put a hand to his neck, felt of the pucker made by Wycliff's bullet ten years before.

Then his wabbly legs collapsed.

There on the ground, surrounded by death, Breen watched the shadow that was Buck Connor crawl weakly about on hands and knees. Saw him stop where a white-haired head glistened in the silver light, take that limp head into his arms. He heard old Bert Connor's voice.

"My boy. You've come—"

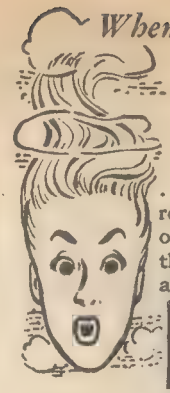
Then Buck Connor let his father's head down tenderly. Weaving, he made his way to Bill Breen. He smiled at the ghost of the man who had snatched him from the noose ten years before.

"He'll live," he said.

"Which was lucky as hell," Breen said weakly. "He heard Wycliff clear you of that murder charge. They'd call me a liar, but they'll take the word of a gent as stiff-necked as that damn ranny!"

But there was a note of affection in Bill Breen's voice. He sighed tiredly.

"Mebbe," he mumbled softly, "his reputation o' being so almighty law-abidin' will come in handy after all!" ★ ★ ★



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*Elip—spells PILE backwards!

(Continued from page 93)

et. But just as he fired, Waldron dived off his good leg, dived under the flash and hit Cantrell's knees. Down they went like a landslide, knocking a grunt out of both.

Blindly, Waldron clawed for Cantrell's gun-hand, missed, and tried again. This time he got the dirty whipcord wrist, and just in time. The gun fired, and somewhere broken glass tinkled.

With a knee in Cantrell's belly now, Waldron was using both hands to get the gun. Cantrell's left claw was in Waldron's hair, yanking, twisting.

Then Waldron got the gun, slugged with it once, and the fingers in his hair went slack.

"Look out!" someone yelled.

Quick as a bronc's kick Waldron rolled to his knees and fired. It was a lucky shot, the luckiest he'd ever made. As Kitchel dropped his gun, it fell almost in Waldron's face.

But Waldron hardly knew it. With breath coming in great tearing gasps, he went down like an empty sack.

The voices were all around him and he opened his eyes again. Sutcliff was hunkered down beside him. "Your guess was good," Sutcliff said. "We found the Spanish coin in his pocket."

Waldron sat up, saw the sheriff. "You're free as a hawk," Zinn said. "Soon's we get a wagon hitched I'm takin' both them hoodlums in to a doctor and the jail. Kitchel showed he's knee-deep in this too, only he had Cantrell do the dirty work."

It was an hour or so before Waldron got himself shaped up to leave. The saddlebags were on the dun and, hat in hand, Waldron was saying good-by to the Sutcliffs. "Soon's you want a ridin' job there's one for you here," Sutcliff said.

Sitting in his saddle, Waldron looked down into Belle's eyes. There was something there he was glad to see. "I'll be back," he said, lifting the reins. ★ ★ ★

GOLD for the KILLING

By Bess Ritter

TWO distinct professional classes of people lived in the old romantic west: One mined precious metals. The other worked just as hard, attempting to wrest the hard-won gold and silver away from the first group. Sometimes the thieves won out; and sometimes they didn't. One little scheme that was worked successfully for quite some time by Chinese laundrymen consisted of their offering to do up the shirts of miners, free of charge. They didn't mind "working for nothing" because there was always plenty of pure golden grains in the bottom of the tubs, which they panned free of the dirt that clung to it.

A silver mining outfit, on the other hand, that refined its metal on the spot, didn't lose much time outwitting a band of thieves that was making a habit of taking off with the coveted bars of silver, via strong-arm methods. The miners simply cast the metal into one large ball, which grew and grew each time new metal was refined. Consequently, the bandits just had to give up—because the stuff was too heavy for them to tote away! ★ ★ ★

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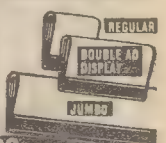

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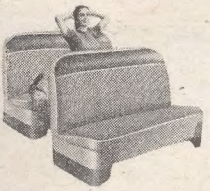

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